

**LEARNING TO BE FREE:
THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
(1) DISCIPLINE OF THE WORD**

John 8:31-36

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PROLOGUE

Gary Enrich writes about a time when he was riding with his 4 year-old son Steven in the car and whenever little Steven saw something through his window that he thought interesting he would point and shout, "Holy Cow, Dad, look at that!" Enrich explained to his son that they did not use that expression in their family. God is holy and the things of God are holy. Steven thought about that for a moment and then he asked, "What about the Scriptures, Dad? Aren't the Scriptures holy? After all, that's God's Word." Enrich agreed and a feeling of pride welled up within him for teaching such a great lesson to his little son. Ten minutes later, Steven again saw something through his window that caught his attention, and so he pointed and shouted, "Holy Scriptures, Dad, look at that!" So much for the great lesson learned.

But Steven was right on one point, that there is something special about the Scriptures.

SCRIPTURE

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; {32} and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." {33} They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" {34} Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. {35} The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. {36} So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:31-36 NRSV).

I. THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Jesus came to set us free. Most Christians would agree that Jesus came to set us free from the consequences of sin such as judgment and separation from God. But far fewer appreciate that Jesus also came to set us free from the effects of sin in our lives such as the distractions, fears and destructive self-centeredness with which we struggle on a daily basis.

Many believe that, because of Christ's death on the cross, God forgives us and we can go to heaven. But not many try to figure out what it means to be free in Christ here and now. Consequently, we have millions of professing Christians who are prepared to die but not prepared to live.

The Bible tells us:

As servants of God, live as free people (1 Pet 2:16 NRSV).

Only one person in history has ever lived a completely free life and that was Jesus of Nazareth. I am not talking about his outward circumstances since, of course he was arrested, held captive and executed. (But even in this he was a willing participant in God's greater plan.) No, I am talking about the essence of who he was and is – completely free in his spirit. If we want to live as free people we need to live like Jesus, we need to be like Jesus.

God can help us become like Jesus and we cannot become like Jesus without God's help. But God also wants us to cooperate with him in this endeavor. The process of learning to become like Jesus is usually called discipleship by Protestant Christians and spiritual formation by Roman Catholic Christians. The terms are basically synonymous and in the last two decades more Roman Catholics have been talking about discipleship and more Protestants have been talking about spiritual formation. A rose by any other name...

Spiritual formation requires the priority of attention. We need to be attentive to what God is doing in our lives. Attention requires discipline. We are easily distracted and easily fooled. Spiritual disciplines, properly applied, free us from much distraction and much foolishness. They are our allies in the quest for a Christlike character. Peter says:

Prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you (1 Pet 1:13 NRSV)

Jesus gave priority to the disciplines of Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping. Other disciplines are implied or expressed, but these three are essential and we will consider them first. Later in the series we will look at some of the other disciplines. In line with this, I recommend the book, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* by Richard Foster.

Meanwhile, let me emphasize that the disciplines of Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping are foundational. They help free us from distraction, fear and selfishness so we are free to embrace all of life as an act of faith, which is the very definition of Christian spirituality.

II. THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

(1) DISCIPLINE OF THE WORD:

Today we are going to look at the discipline of the Word. Jesus said:

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know

the truth, and the truth will make you free” (31b, 32)

Practicing the discipline of the Word not only shows that we are disciples of Jesus, it is also necessary for our spiritual freedom. The discipline of the Word involves three things: knowledge, consideration and action.

1. KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORD

We need to have a knowledge of the Word.

One national survey showed that the most widely known Bible verse among adult and teen believers is, “God helps those who help themselves.” However, this verse is not in the Bible and actually contradicts the basic message of the Gospel.

According to researchers George Gallup and Jim Castelli:

"Americans revere the Bible - but, by and large, they don't read it. And because they don't read it, [we] have become a nation of biblical illiterates."

Life has patterns. Patterns form rhythms. The Bible is full of rhythms. If we want to know Scripture then we need to match the patterns of Scripture to the patterns of our lives.

For many years, Reformed Christians read three chapters a day: one in the morning, one at noon and one in the evening. This way the whole Bible was read in a year except for the last six chapters of Revelation, which were to be read on the last day of the year.¹ If this pattern does not work for you then find a pattern that does. If you have never read the Bible cover to cover before you may want to start out with an easy-to-read paraphrase such as THE MESSAGE.

2. CONSIDERATION OF THE WORD

A good working knowledge of the basic themes of the Bible is important, but in addition to knowledge of the Word we also need to have consideration of the Word. Richard Foster points out, “that a vast difference exists between the study of Scripture and the devotional reading of Scripture.”² It is one thing to be familiar with the content of the Bible and quite another to take its message to heart.

Roman Catholic Christians have traditionally called the devotional reading of Scripture *Lectio Divina* (Lec-tsee-oh Di-vee-nah). This Latin phrase is almost as difficult to

¹Howard Rice, Reformed Spirituality (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 109.

²Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 69.

pronounce as it is to explain. It means, “Divine Reading.” It can be traced back to a 5th Century monastic leader named Benedict. More and more Protestants are becoming interested in *Lectio Divina*. For example, Eugene Peterson (THE MESSAGE) has recently published a book called, “Eat This Book – a Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading” that is based on this idea.

Presbyterian and Reformed Christians have also had a term to describe devotional reading. Traditionally, we have called it the “consideration of the text.” The term “text” refers to the selected passage of Scripture. The passage may have come from the Sunday morning service. It may be the next section as you go through a particular book of the Bible, like the Gospel of Mark. It may have come from a published schedule of readings like a lectionary. But wherever the selection comes from, bear in mind it is difficult to consider more than ten to fifteen verses in a week.³

Now some of you may be thinking I just contradicted myself. “A minute ago you said read three chapters a day but now you’re saying ten verses a week. What gives?” Well, the three chapters a day (or whatever pattern you want to follow) gives you the overall content of the Bible. It helps you know what the Bible says. But if you want to know what the Bible says *to you* then you need to slow down and meditate on its meaning.

Some of you are not in any Bible study and that is too bad. Some of you are in a great many Bible studies and while that may not be a bad thing, it may not be as helpful as you might think. Your situation may be something like this: You get a passage from the Sunday morning service, a passage from Sunday School, a passage from the radio broadcast as you drove in, a passage from your daytime study, a passage from your evening group, a passage as you watched Charles Stanley on TV, not to mention all the Scripture passages from the one or more daily devotionals you use. But here is the thing. You cannot process all those passages in one week. No one can. It would be like going to Old Country Buffet and filling up your plate with all kinds of food and never going back to the table to eat!

So whether you are new to Bible study or you do lots of Bible studies, I think you will find a slowed down approach to be more nurturing and more liberating. The steps for this spiritual discipline are quite simple. (They are printed in the bookmark section of your worship programs.) This is not the only way to do this. There is no law that says you have to do it this way. But this will at least get you started.

First of all, find a quiet place to collect your thoughts. Shake off the troubles of the day. Relax. Take two or three slow, deep breaths. Then prepare yourself to read. I believe John

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer highly recommended we only focus on ten to fifteen verses per week.

White was right when he said we must first approach Scripture with a sense of awe.⁴ Seek to be genuinely open to whatever God has in store for you.

Secondly, read the passage aloud. I realize that is not always practical, but the greatest benefit is gained from reading aloud. Reading aloud also slows things down. It encourages you to consider and reflect on what has been said. The One Minute Bible is a contradiction in terms.

Thirdly, read it again. Repetition is a key to this discipline. It trains the mind and keeps it from distraction. It frees the heart to feel the power of the Word. How many repetitions? That depends on your lifestyle. The busier your life, the more repetitions you need.

Fourthly, reflect on the passage. What are your impressions? Are there one or two key words or ideas that stand? At this point, having a journal handy to record your thoughts can be quite useful.

Fifthly, as a follow up to this, consider how the passage applies to your life. What is God saying to you? You may or may not like what you hear but you will not come away empty. John Wesley taught that we need to examine ourselves whenever we examine Scripture and show praise if God helped us to live right and humiliation if we have fallen short.

Finally, pray about the passage. Include some of the words and ideas from the passage in your prayer. John White believed that prayer and reading were of mutual benefit and were meant to be joined together.⁵ Pray that you will learn from the passage. Pray also that you will be shaped by what you have learned. Pray in gratitude to God. Pray for others in a deeper appreciation for their needs.

These are the six steps for consideration of the text. This is not the only way to do devotional reading of Scripture but it does get you started and is consistent with how Reformed Christians have historically done it.

3. DOING THE WORD

We need to know the Word. We need to consider the Word. And we need to be doers of the Word. James says:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.
Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who

⁴Rice, 115.

⁵Rice, 117.

look at their faces in a mirror and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like. But those who look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continue in it—not forgetting what they have heard but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do (James 1:22-25).

The aim of discipleship is to be like Jesus. This will not happen if we are unwilling to do what Jesus wants us to do. We are free people insofar as we continue in his Word. What our minds have learned from reading the Word and our hearts have felt from considering the Word must be shown by our hands in doing the Word.

CONCLUSION

Jesus came to set us free. Spiritual disciplines help us to experience this freedom because they help us to become like Christ. The disciplines free us from distraction, fear and selfishness so we are free to embrace all of life as an act of faith. The first of the foundational disciplines is the discipline of the Word. If you want to practice this discipline you need to do three things: (1) You need to find a way to become familiar with the overall content of the Bible such as reading or listening to the entire Bible in a year. (2) You need to find time to take a closer look at the meaning of Scripture for your life such as doing a devotional reading of ten to fifteen verses a week. (3) You need to seek opportunities to put into practice what you have learned from Scripture. By continuing in the Lord's Word you show you are his disciples. You learn the truth about God, the world and yourself, and that truth sets you free.