

**LEARNING TO BE FREE:
THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
(4) INNER DISCIPLINES**

Psalm 42

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PROLOGUE

Many church people go on a diet during Lent. I am not sure if dieting is really a spiritual discipline, but try to remember that 'stressed' is just desserts spelled backwards!

SCRIPTURE

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. {2}
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? {3} My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?" {4} These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. {5} Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help {6} and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. {7} Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me. {8} By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. {9} I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" {10} As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?" {11} Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God (Psalm 42 NRSV).

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Spiritual disciplines are time-honored practices that help us pay attention to what God is doing in our lives and free us to embrace all of life as an act of faith. Jesus gave priority to the disciplines of Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping and we have examined each of these in turn. Other disciplines are implied or expressed, but these three are foundational.

The other disciplines can be placed in one of three broad categories: Inner Disciplines,

Outer Disciplines, and Community Disciplines.¹ Some people speak of private disciplines rather than inner disciplines but I resist this. Christianity may be personal but it is not private. Just as the Spirit is not independent of Christ so too our spirituality is not independent of the Body of Christ, which is the Church.

Nevertheless, for all practical purposes, inner disciplines are those disciplines practiced alone, outer disciplines are practiced in relation to others, and community disciplines are practiced within the community of faith.

THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

(4) INNER DISCIPLINES

Today we are going to look at the inner disciplines of meditation, fasting and spiritual reading. These are not the only inner disciplines. But these three can serve as examples.

The spiritual life that is based on such disciplines is not meant to be a substitute for intimacy with God. Spiritual disciplines are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. They help to put us in a position of availability so we can experience God and grow in our faith.

1. MEDITATION

The first inner discipline we shall look at is meditation.

If you go into Barnes and Noble® and look for a book on meditation, you will be faced with a bewildering array of choices. The religions of the world offer various approaches to meditation. Some use it to detach from this world, while others use it to gain a clearer understanding of this world. Some use it to cleanse their minds, while others use it to receive a mystical vision.

You do not have to be religious to meditate. Some people use meditation techniques to relieve stress or alleviate pain. Some use meditation to improve their memory. And still others use meditation as part of their anger management regime.

A third category of books on mediation takes bits and pieces of the first two categories, adds some pop-psychology and a little new age philosophy to come up with some really weird stuff. One book on meditation I found was called, “Mastering Astral projection in 90 Days.” Listen to what one of the authors says, “What you hold before you is a hands-on, step-by-step manual for learning how to have an out-of-body experience in less than three months.” Okay, that is definitely weird!

¹Richard Foster uses these same categories in *Celebration of Discipline* but in a slightly different way.

The Christian practice of meditation does not really fit into any of these three categories. The Christian practice of meditation is a disciplined form of reading Scripture. There are many ways to do this, but meditation on Scripture remains the reference point.

There is a difference between the study of Scripture and the meditation of Scripture. As Christ followers we do need to study Scripture. Through prayer, and by using the right tools and a measure of hard work we try to understand the literature, what the passage said to the original readers, and how it fits in with the rest of Scripture, in order to determine what the passage says. This is the study of Scripture also known as the exegesis of Scripture.

Meditation, on the other hand, centers on internalizing the passage. What does it say to you? Richard Foster writes in his book *Celebration of Discipline*:

The written Word becomes a living word addressed to you. This is not a time for technical studies, or analysis, or even the gathering of material to share with others. Set aside all tendencies toward arrogance and with a humble heart receive the word addressed to you.

Consider also how Dietrich Bonhoeffer defines meditation:

". . . Just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all. That is meditation."²

Let's consider how this would be done in actual practice using Psalm 42. If you were to study Psalm 42 you would learn that Psalm 42 and Psalm 43 belong together as one poem. (Bear in mind that chapter and verse numbers were not part of the original writing of Scripture but were added centuries later to help readers locate passages.) You would also learn that we do not know the exact historical circumstances that prompted the writing. The psalmist may have been a refugee but more likely he was in exile in Assyria or Babylon. He recalls temple services as things of the past (42:4); is surrounded by foes who ridicule him (42:3, 9-10); and believes only an act of God can bring him back (43:3).

The poem follows a simple structure built around questions and a three-fold refrain. The writer questions God and himself while his enemies taunt him, "Where is your God?" The refrain responds to the questions and encourages the writer, as well as everyone who reads the poem, to look to God for deliverance, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God" (42:5, 11; 43:5).

²Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, p. 59.

To meditate on this passage requires a slower and less distracted approach. If Bonhoeffer were here he might suggest spending a week on this one passage, reading and thinking about it each day. You may also find it useful to keep a journal of your thoughts as you meditate.

Asking yourself personal questions in connection with the passage can be helpful. Have you ever longed for God with an intensity of a great thirst. Do you, like the deer long for the living, fresh, clear water of God rather than the polluted, clogged waterways that are all around us? Do you pray that God will refresh you with clear and sparkling water that will fill you with God's goodness? Such questions help us find out what the passage means to us – the goal of meditation.

2. FASTING

The second inner discipline we shall examine is fasting.

In the strictest sense, fasting is abstinence from food for a certain period of time. Many religions practice fasting. In Islam, it is one of the "Five Pillars," that is, one of the five primary responsibilities incumbent on every Muslim.

Fasting is not necessarily a religious experience. Some people fast for medical reasons such as the brief fast needed before a blood test. Some people use fasting as a weight-loss technique. Still other use fasting to make a political statement, although then it is usually called a hunger strike. Gandhi, for example, engaged in several famous hunger strikes to protest the British occupation of India.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were commanded to fast on the Day of Atonement, but they chose to fast on other days as well. They fasted when they were in mourning, when they were troubled by their sins, or when they wanted to get closer to God. Unfortunately, many people abused fasting. They used fasting as a means of trying to make God owe them something or as a way of impressing others with their religious behavior. Isaiah severely criticized this practice. He believed that real fasting meant being concerned about the hungry, the homeless, and the oppressed (see Isa. 58:6-7).

Fasting is not mentioned often in the New Testament. However, we do know that Jesus fasted for forty days before beginning his ministry and that the apostles fasted for short periods when they were choosing leaders or seeking wisdom about a new course for the church. Jesus offers this warning about fasting:

"And when you fast, do not put on a sad face as the hypocrites do [referring to the Pharisees]. They neglect their appearance so that everyone will see that they are fasting. I assure you, they have already been paid in full. When you go without food, wash your face and comb your hair, so that others cannot know that you are fasting— only your Father, who is unseen, will know"

(Matthew 6:16-18 TEV).

The comments from Isaiah and Jesus reveal that fasting is more than mere abstinence from food—it is abstinence from food motivated by an unpretentious desire to honor God in all things. Fasting is not magical—it is simply a vivid reminder of our dependence on God and our need for prayer. The Christian practice of fasting is a disciplined form of prayer.

The Reformed Tradition does not have a strong heritage of fasting. Swiss Reformers after Calvin often staged sausage eating contests during Lent – not exactly getting into the spirit of the season. Now the practice of fasting during Lent goes back centuries but in defense of the Swiss Reformers I would have to say they were reacting to what they thought were abuses in their day: church mandated fasts and the belief that if you fast then God owes you a favor.

John Calvin practiced fasting in his personal life and taught that fasting could be an aid to prayer. He was highly critical of any practices of fasting that smacked of hypocrisy, superstition, or works of merit. Instead, fasting was to be seen as an opportunity for reorienting the heart, including repentance, self-examination, and humility.

If you would like to fast, but have never fasted before, consider a partial fast from sunrise to sunset. Instead of abstaining from all food you might eliminate certain types of food like sweets or bread or red meat, or eliminate one or more meals (e.g, skip lunch), or eliminate all solid foods.

People who have relevant health problems or women who are pregnant should not fast. As an alternative, you may wish to abstain from some non-food item for a time such as Television, video games or Facebook. In any case, it needs to be an act of self-denial that disrupts your routine.

If you decide on a total twenty-four-hour fast, be sure to drink plenty of water during the day. Also, when you break fast, do so gently. Try things like fruit juice, yogurt or fresh fruit first. If you cram your system with junk food, you will regret it!

In any case, fasting should free up some of the minutes of your day so that you can spend time in prayer. When you hear your stomach growl or feel a hunger pang, think of all that Christ went through on your behalf and praise God for his providential care.

3. SPIRITUAL READING

A third inner discipline I want to mention is spiritual reading.

Spiritual reading does not refer to the content of a book that is read but the manner in which

a book is read. Spiritual reading does not necessarily mean reading books on religious subjects but reading any book that helps you listen for the Spirit of God.

Eugene Peterson describes spiritual reading this way:

For Christians the Bible is the primary book for spiritual reading. In the course of reading Scripture, it is only natural that we fall into conversation with friends who are also reading it. These leisurely, relaxed, ruminating conversations continue across continents and centuries and languages by means of books—and these books offer themselves for spiritual reading.³

If this kind of thing is new to you, let me suggest a starter list. Obviously, this is highly subjective on my part. But these, at least, are some of the time-honored classics:

- *The Confessions* of St. Augustine
- *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis
- *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence
- Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (use a modern translation!)
- *Purity of Heart* by Søren Kierkegaard
- *The Journal* of John Wesley
- *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien
- *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis

An excellent book on suggested readings is *Take and Read* by Eugene Peterson. This is the prequel to *Take and Eat* mentioned earlier in this series.

By the way, do not be discouraged by all the books you have not read. You will likely not read all of these I *have* mentioned and you will read others that I have *not* mentioned. There is a vast abundance of excellent literature available. Remember, the joy of spiritual reading is not found in the quantity of books you read, but in fully experiencing what you do read.

CONCLUSION

Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping are the foundational disciplines. They help us to live as free people in Christ. The inner disciplines build on their foundation. Meditation is a disciplined form of reading Scripture. Fasting is a disciplined form of praying. And while spiritual reading is not the same as Sabbath-keeping, both connect us to friends who are part of the greater family of God.

³Peterson, *Take and Read*, p. x.