

**LEARNING TO BE FREE:
THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
(5) OUTER DISCIPLINES**

Matthew 6:1-4
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PROLOGUE

In 1543 Nicolas Copernicus caused a cosmological revolution when he stated that the Sun and not the Earth was the center of the Solar System. This disturbed and eventually humbled people who preferred to think that the Earth was the center.

It seems to me that each of us needs to go through a Copernican revolution: Instead of seeing life as revolving around ourselves we need to see life as revolving around the Son - the Son of God. This is the aim of discipleship - to become like Christ.

SCRIPTURE

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. {2} "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. {3} But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, {4} so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:1-4 NRSV).

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

God wants us to become like Jesus in our faith, character and humanity. Learning to become like Jesus is called discipleship or spiritual formation. It requires that we pay attention to what God is doing in our lives. Attention requires discipline. Spiritual disciplines help us to pay attention so we can become like Christ and live as free people.

Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping are the foundational disciplines. Other spiritual disciplines can be laid upon these foundational disciplines and include inner disciplines, which are generally practiced alone; outer disciplines, which are practiced in relation to others; and community disciplines, which are practiced within the community of faith.

THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
(5) OUTER DISCIPLINES

Today we are going to look at the outer disciplines of simplicity, kindness and service. Just as meditation, fasting, and spiritual reading are not the only inner disciplines, so too these

are not the only outer disciplines. But they can serve as examples.

1. SIMPLICITY

The first of the outer disciplines we shall consider is simplicity. This is not the same as being simplistic or being a simpleton. Simplicity is the opposite of duplicity. Simplicity refers to a single purpose or focus. There is no attempt to deceive. It is straightforward and honest. Duplicity refers to double-dealing – trying to please two contradictory parties at the same time. We want people to have a high opinion of us but we also want to indulge our selfish desires.

In Jesus' day some people reasoned that if they swore an oath and did not actually mention God's name then they were not obligated to keep it. The oath was a deception. It gave the appearance of a commitment to the truth but in reality it was a devious way to avoid the truth. Jesus rejected such thinking as duplicity. He said,

“Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37 NIV).

When we practice duplicity we reveal that we do not have a center focus around which our lives are oriented. Lack of a center focus creates insecurity. The primary way we try to gain security is through material possessions. So Jesus gave this warning:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; {20} but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. {21} For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ..{24} "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt 6:19-21, 23-24 NRSV).

This passage is not saying that it is sinful to have such assets as insurance, retirement plans, and savings accounts. Nor is material gain in and of itself wrong. Rather, earthly treasures can consume us if we let them. Jesus is telling us that we are not to set our hearts and hopes on that which does not last.

Martin Luther wrote, “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.” Follow your heartstrings; if they do not lead to the God who made heaven and earth and mercifully sent us his Son, then they lead to the wrong god. And following false gods will, in the end be something less than satisfying.

In our culture, inordinate wealth (by global standards) is an enormous threat to our spiritual

health. The love of money seems to have no upper limit. Richard Easterlin, professor of economics at University of Southern California, has studied relative happiness. In a National Public Radio interview (All Things Considered, Jan. 4, 2002), Easterlin identified a phenomenon that psychologists call "hedonic adaptation." This means that as one's income rises there is an initial sense of greater happiness, but that eventually wears off as one's aspirations also rise. Ultimately, people in roughly all income categories report that they would need about 20 percent more income to be happy. It is a kind of treadmill with no satisfactory end.

Simplicity, on the other hand, brings freedom and security. It is to know and love one God - the God who made us and who, in Jesus Christ, has mercifully redeemed us. It is to recognize that all that we have and all that we are comes from God. Our lives and property are on loan to us. And we are responsible for what we do with what has been given us.

The practice of the spiritual discipline of simplicity has taken many forms over the years, but its always based on this fundamental principle that all that we have belongs to God. If we cannot affirm this principle then we will never experience the freedom and peace of mind that simplicity can bring. Jesus tells us:

“So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' {32} For the Gentiles run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. {33} But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:31-33).

Simplicity as a lifestyle has been practiced by such diverse groups as the Franciscans, the Amish, and the Society of Friends – also known as Quakers. Franciscans take a vow of poverty, that is, they give up the notion of private ownership. The Amish try to live as though it is still 1850. Quakers, of whom Richard Foster is one, practice what they call “the testimony of simplicity.” This is the simplifying of one’s life in order to focus on what is most important.

But if you are not a Franciscan, not Amish, and not a Quaker, what do you do? One practical introduction to simplicity is called “the daily give-away.” This is where you get rid of at least one item every day. The catch is it cannot be something you were going to get rid of anyway, like the kitchen garbage. The item may be big or small. It may still have value, in which case you can donate it some charitable organization. It may have no value but you have been reluctant to toss it. In any case, by giving or tossing the item away you have taken a step toward simplifying your life. The daily give-away helps you to reduce clutter, minimize your attachment to material things, and focus on what is most important in life.

2. KINDNESS

The second of the outer disciplines we shall consider is kindness. Now kindness is something all Christians are to practice. In this sense it is not a discipline but an aspect of our character as we rely upon the Holy Spirit to grow in Christ. It is part of what we call the “Fruit of the Spirit.” Paul tells us:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23 NIV).

Spiritual disciplines can help us see the fruit of the Spirit produced in our lives, one aspect of which is kindness. But the spiritual discipline of kindness is a little different. It refers to specific acts done without recognition.

A basic fear the many people have is the fear of losing control. This desire to control often shows itself in our personal relationships. If you are a control freak (and many of us are), then because you think *you* know best, you use your words and behavior to manipulate other people into compliance. You always have to have the last word. You always give advice whether asked for or not. You look for ways to keep people dependent on you. Your gifts always come with “strings attached.”

The discipline of kindness speaks to this. It encourages you to help people without having to control them. It teaches you to love without strings attached.

The way it works is like this. At least once a week do something nice for someone else. However, it must be done anonymously. The person must never know it was you. No hints. No clues. No clearing your throat and saying, “By the way, did you happen to find a greeting card with \$20 in it the other day?” Hint, hint. Wink, wink. None of that! No one is to know except you and God. Ever.

At first, you are probably going to choose friends and family members. And that’s fine. But if you want to grow in this discipline, then you also need to choose people whom you do not like, who may even despise you. Yes, that’s right. I am suggesting you do something nice for someone who is a thorn in your side and never, ever getting credit for it! In this way you begin to appreciate God’s unconditional love toward you. Paul says:

God our Savior showed us how good and kind he is. He saved us because of his mercy, and not because of any good things that we have done (Titus 3:4-5a CEV).

The discipline of kindness will also benefit your prayer life. You will think more about the specific needs people have. You will develop a more gracious attitude toward those whom

you may consider to be your enemies. Listen to Jesus:

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, {45} so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:44-45a NRSV).

3. SERVICE

The third of the outer disciplines we shall consider is service. Here we have the same potential confusion as we did with kindness. All Christians are to practice kindness every day whether such kindness is recognized or not. But the spiritual discipline of kindness refers to specific acts of mercy done anonymously.

All Christians are to engage in service. But the spiritual discipline called “service” refers to specific practices that will benefit all aspects of the Christian life and not just that part we call service or ministry.

The discipline of service addresses pride. Pride is the chief of sins. When I use the word “pride” I am aware that in English it has more than one meaning. It can refer to self-respect and there is nothing wrong with that. It can refer to a joyful satisfaction in someone else’s accomplishments such as your son or daughter and there is nothing wrong with that. But the Bible uses pride to mean an arrogant selfishness that says, “What I want is far more important than what you want. I come first.” It was pride that led the Devil to say to God, “Let’s trade places.” And when that didn’t work he got Adam and Eve to try to do much the same thing and we have been suffering the consequences ever since.

The Apostle Paul when he was Saul of Tarsus was filled with pride until he met Jesus Christ and was transformed by the grace of God. Paul knew he was a great sinner but he discovered that the grace of God is greater still. His pride was replaced with humble gratitude.

The discipline of service is first and foremost a recognition that it is only because of the service of Jesus Christ that we have been redeemed. Secondly, because we have been transformed by the grace of God, we want to show our gratitude by following Jesus’ example. He said:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. {26} It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, {27} and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; {28} just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:25-28 NRSV).

This requires an attitude shift. Bruce Thielemann from the First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh has passed on a story that I have told some of you before. He tells of a conversation with a member of his congregation who said, "You preachers talk a lot about 'do unto others,' but when you get right down to it, it comes down to basin theology." Thielemann asked, "Basin theology? What's that?" The man said, "Remember what Pilate did when he had the chance to acquit Jesus? He called for a basin and washed his hands of the whole thing. But Jesus, the night before his death, called for a basin and proceeded to wash the feet of the disciples. It all comes down to basin theology: Which basin will you use?"

A practical introduction to the discipline of service is called "place-changing." This is where you voluntarily and without fuss change places with someone facing an unpleasant task. However, it must not be a job that you probably should have been doing anyway.

Every social sphere, whether at home or the workplace or in a recreational pursuit, seems to have a pecking order. Generally speaking, the person who is lowest on the pecking order gets the jobs no one else wants to do. The discipline of service messes with the pecking order. Strictly speaking, the Christian discipline of service does not even recognize that there are pecking orders.

If you want to practice this discipline, then the next time you are in a situation where it seems to be someone else's "job" to make the coffee, or pick up the soccer balls or clean the proverbial "chick coop" – do the job yourself or at least work alongside the person who is doing it. Do not be condescending before you start. Do not look for a pat on the back when you are finished. Simply serve like Jesus would serve.

CONCLUSION

There are other ways to practice simplicity, kindness and service than what I have outlined. But the "daily-give-away," anonymous good deeds, and "place-changing" are good ways to start. These outer disciplines, like the inner disciplines, build upon the foundational disciplines of Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping. Like all spiritual disciplines they are intended to help us to live as free people in Christ. The discipline of simplicity, like the discipline of Scripture, helps us to focus on what is most important. The discipline of kindness helps our prayer life by encouraging us to pray for people we might not otherwise pray for. And the discipline of service, like the discipline of Sabbath-keeping, helps us to treat people as human beings made in the image of God.