

Lesson For Week One:

What Is Spiritual Formation

“We need some very concrete spiritual disciplines to help us fully appropriate and internalize our joys and sorrows and find in them our unique way to spiritual freedom.”¹

--Henri Nouwen, author of *Spiritual Formation*

“Spiritual formation, I have come to believe, is not about steps or stages on the way to perfection. It’s about the *movements* from the mind to the heart through prayer in its many forms that reunite us with God, each other, and our truest selves.”²

--Henri Nouwen

A Parable:

Once there was a man who took a hike through a beautiful forest on a perfect spring day, a day when the weather was not too hot, nor too cold, but just right. The sun was shining brightly on that day. The sunshine broke through the tree branches and made shadowy forms on the forest floor. These shadowy forms looked like pixies dancing the dance of spring. The young man followed a path, which led to a fork in the road. The young man had a decision to make. He stood at the fork in the road and debated with himself which path to choose. The path to the left descended into the forest. It was clearly visible and well trodden. The path to the right was so overgrown with brush that it was almost invisible to the eye. It ascended at a relatively sharp angle. It was difficult to see, but what could be seen looked very dangerous.

Upon closer investigation, the man saw that the two roads were both marked with signs. The sign on the road to the left, the easy road, read, “The Way of Legalism.” He had to dig out the sign on the road to the right, but once he had cleared it from the overgrowth, he found that it read, “The Way of the Heart.” The young man was a novice hiker. But he had been learning the art of hiking from an older man who had been hiking all of his life. He remembered a statement that his mentor had said to him on an earlier hike, “Choose your path carefully. One of the greatest individual freedoms that you have in life is the ability to make your own choices. So choose your path wisely, because your path will determine your destination.”

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (Notre Dame Indiana: Ave Marie Press, 1996), p. 93.

² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper Collins, Publishers 2010).

He sat down on his backpack, sipped some water from his canteen and reflected on his choices. He made his decision. He packed his canteen, threw his pack across his shoulders and turned to the right. He began to ascend sharply up the forest floor through thick underbrush and heavy shrubbery.

The journey was more difficult than he had anticipated. The slope of the path was steeper than he realized. He began to sweat. His muscles started to ache. His breathing became heavy. Each step was laborious. The undergrowth was so thick that it felt as if the shrubs were grabbing at his feet attempting to trip him. He began to wonder if he had picked the right road. He thought about turning back.

But then he remembered some special disciplines that his mentor had taught him in their walks together. His mentor taught him how to slow down his breathing, and this slowed down his heart rate. His mentor had taught him the importance of not getting ahead of himself, but to concentrate on every single step of the journey. His mentor had shown him the importance of enjoying the present moment no matter how strenuous or how difficult that moment might be. His mentor had taught him the importance of keeping his eyes focused down the path to know where he was going. Be in the present, but don't forget the future. And his mentor had taught him that if things got too difficult, then just stop, sit, meditate, pray, and search for guidance. These disciplines came in handy now. They helped him to trudge through the most difficult miles of the journey. The road seemed to be getting easier. But he actually wasn't certain if the road was getting easier, or if he was now more prepared for a difficult road.

He followed this path for a long while until it finally led out of the forest and into a meadow. It was a beautiful meadow with green grass and beautiful wild flowers that were swaying in the breeze. He stepped from the shadows of the forest into sunshine of the meadow. His foot sank into the healthy grass. He laid down in the green meadow. He felt like he had no cares in the world. He felt free. He soon drifted into a peaceful sleep. After such a difficult journey, it was nice to rest. When he woke, he stretched his arms and legs and began to walk around the meadow.

He headed east. After walking about a hundred yards, he came upon some water. It was a crystal blue stream that cut its way along the eastern edge of the meadow. His mouth was parched. He bent down to drink from the stream, and he found the water quenched not just his physical thirst, but it seemed to quench a deeper thirst—a thirst deep in his soul.

He followed the stream south. He listened to the babbling brook as it led him along the edge of the forest to the southern part of the meadow. The brook sounded like music to him. He made up words and sang with the music.

After a few minutes, he stumbled onto a small vineyard. The vineyard was laden with fruit. He looked around for a caretaker, but he found no one. The vineyard seemed to take care of itself. He found a certain fruit on the vines that he had never seen before. It looked similar to grapes, but it was thicker and heavier than any grape he had ever seen. It was a yellowish orange color. Since he had never seen this type of fruit, he was uncertain if he should taste it or not. He knew that gardeners often marked their vines with signs that reminded them of the age and production of the vine from year to year. He poked around at the base of the vine until he found a small marker that read, "The fruit of the Spirit. Every year is a good year. Help yourself to the fruit." He stood up and picked fruit from the vine. It glistened in the sunshine.

He bit into the fruit and a taste gripped his taste buds like nothing he had ever tasted before. It seems to him that he was tasting life itself. With the first bite a feeling of love overtook him. With the second bite a sense of joy swept over his body. With the third bite he experienced a peace that went far beyond his understanding. With the fourth bite a wonderful sense of patience engulfed his soul. With the fifth bite he felt like he had been washed in pure goodness. With the sixth bite he felt a breeze of gentleness blow across his face. And with the seventh bite a feeling of self-control covered his entire being. Now he was full. But not full in his stomach. He was full in his spirit. He felt mature, complete, satisfied. More satisfied in his soul than he had ever been before.

He now reflected back on his journey. He thought back to his choice to follow the path marked, "The Way of the Heart." He was thankful that he had chosen the difficult path. He remembered how difficult it was in the beginning, but the direction of his mentor had helped him through the most difficult part of the journey. He reflected back on the words of his mentor, "Choose your path wisely, because your path will determine your destination." By choosing the way of the heart, he now enjoyed the fruit of the Spirit.

As the afternoon turned into evening, he again heard the brook playing her music in the background. This time the birds, the frogs, the crickets, and the katydids joined the symphony. He began to string together some words into a song,

"Choose your path with great discretion

For it becomes your destination
Don't look for the easy way
For easy choices make you pay
Best to pick a difficult road
At the end, you'll lighten your load
This bit of wisdom I will impart
Always walk, "The Way of the Heart."

Spiritual Formation—Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines

In the above parable, the man who begins his journey down the path of the heart encounters a difficult patch of terrain that causes him to stop and wonder if the journey can be completed. Should he turn back or forge ahead through the difficult terrain? He decides to recall some disciplines that a master hiker taught him in the past. These disciplines help him stay on the path of the heart and complete his journey.

As disciples of Jesus, we are all trying to walk the path of the heart on our spiritual journey in life. The goal is to become like Jesus. The goal is spiritual maturity. The process of becoming like Jesus is known as spiritual formation.³ It is also called discipleship.

At times the journey to spiritual maturity is difficult. But God has given us some particular spiritual disciplines that will help us navigate the difficult terrain on this journey toward spiritual maturity. This book is about spiritual formation. It is about the practice of spiritual disciplines that lead to spiritual maturity. In this book we will explore the various spiritual disciplines that God has given us to help us mature in Christ. The disciplines are not the goal. They help us reach the goal—maturity in Christ.

Henry Nouwen, in his wonderful book *Can You Drink the Cup?* writes:

³ Warning: Not all books on spiritual formation are equal. Not all authors who write on spirituality are equal. You must be careful because some books on spirituality are just New Ageism dressed in spiritual clothes (New Ageism is Eastern philosophy like Buddhism or Hinduism written to a Western audience often cloaked in Christian garb). For example, the early writings of Thomas Merton can be very inspiration, but toward the end of his life Merton essentially became a Buddhist. As with every other academic discipline, when you choose books and authors, you must choose wisely.

The disciplines...focus our eyes on the road we are traveling and help us to move forward, step by step, to our goal. We will encounter great obstacles and splendid views, long, dry deserts and also freshwater lakes surrounded by shadow-rich trees. We will have to fight against those who try to attack and rob us. We also will make wonderful friends. We will often wonder if we will ever make it, but one day we will see coming to us the One who has been waiting for us from all eternity to welcome us home.⁴

I like to think of spiritual formation as “spiritual personal development.” You might have read a personal development book within the last year or two. Have you ever read a book on spiritual personal development? What is the difference between the two? Personal development books are also called self-help books. Spiritual personal development is not “self-help.” Spiritual personal development is “God-help.” In that one change of words, from self-help to God-help, is a world of difference.

Spiritual:

Psalm 42:1-2 reads, *“As the deer pants for streams of water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for God, the living God.”*

Spiritual growth begins by thirsting for God. You do you know what it is like to be really thirsty? You are out working in the yard on a hot summer day and you feel parched. When you are thirsty, a drink of water is satisfying.

We all have a spiritual thirst. The only one who can satisfy that thirst is God. You can look other places to satisfy the thirst, but it won’t work. It might work for a short time, but the thirst will return. God is the only one who can quench our spiritual thirst.

Remember the old tea commercials where a thirsty person takes a drink of tea? When this person tilts the head back to drink the tea, he or she keeps tilting until the whole body splashes into a swimming pool. The tea felt so good it was jumping into a pool of water. Sweet Southern ice tea with lemon can be that good. If it has enough sugar in it, it’s like drinking tea and eating a candy bar at the same time. That’s refreshing.

Spiritually speaking only God can quench our thirst. Our soul thirsts for the living God. When we find God, “Splash,” it’s like jumping into a pool on a hot summer day.

There are many self-help books that can help you in your life. I’ve been helped by some of these books. You can find books on how to get rich, how to boost your confidence, how to find your voice, how to start a business, how to reach your goals, or how to find

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1996. pp. 100-101.

your soul mate. I love personal development books, and I read several every year. I'm a huge fan of authors like Stephen Covey, John Maxwell, Zig Ziglar, Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale.

When I talk about "spiritual personal development," I'm not talking about self-help book. I'm talking about God-help. At some point, we need to allow God to work on us. The sooner we allow him to work on our hearts, the sooner we will grow into the mature disciple that he wants us to be.

Spiritual growth comes from learning to think spiritually. We have to stop thinking like the world and start thinking like Jesus. Paul says in **1 Cor. 3:1-3**, "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. ²I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³You are still worldly." This is an indictment on the disciples in Corinth. They had not grown. They were still on milk when they should have been eating solid food. They were thinking like the world instead of like Jesus.

Personal:

How is spiritual growth personal? Although we live with each other in a community, each of us has a personal relationship with God that we must nurture. Each individual disciple is responsible for his or her own spiritual growth. Philippians 2:12-13 reads, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." We should be grateful and give credit to anyone who helps us reach spiritual maturity, but if we fail to mature, then we have no one to blame but ourselves. Why? Because spiritual growth is first and foremost a personal matter.

Also, spiritual growth is also a personal matter because everyone grows differently. No two people grow in the same way. We also grow at different paces. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak." We grow at different speeds and in different ways. The oak and the apple tree don't mature at the same pace. People don't either.

Also, realize that what spiritually motivates me might not motivate you. And what motivates you might not motivate me. Each of us connects to God in different ways. I receive my greatest encouragement from my individual study of God's Word. For someone else, their greatest encouragement might come from special relationships with other disciples. For a third person, they might connect to God more readily through prayer and meditation. There is no "one size fits all" spiritual growth program. We must discover individually what motivates us and what nurtures our spirit.

Development:

“Learning to become an adult is not an easy task. Perhaps becoming an adult while you’re already living in an adult body is even harder.”

—Dr. Henry Cloud, clinical psychologist

“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

—Luke 2:52

Jesus grew. Growth is good. Luke 2:52 mentions that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. This means that Jesus grew in four areas.

- Wisdom
- Stature
- Favor with God
- Favor with Man

God wants us to grow. He is fully committed to helping us grow into solid, mature disciples of Jesus. But too often, we are haphazard about our own spiritual growth. It is hit or miss. We don’t have a plan. We need to develop an individual plan for spiritual growth and then work the plan.

We need to realize that God is our father. As our father he wants us to succeed. He has given us everything in life that we need to succeed. We just need to look to him for guidance. And he wants to be our guide. He is invested in our personal development.

As Dr. Henry Cloud noted in the quote above, growth doesn’t come easily. We have to work at it. It’s not natural for us to be spiritual thinkers. It is a struggle. Henri J.M. Nouwen writes:

We live in a worry-filled world. We find ourselves occupied and preoccupied with many things, while at the same time feeling bored, resentful, depressed, and very lonely. In the midst of this world the Son of God, Jesus Christ, appears and offers us new life, the life of the Spirit of God. We desire this life, but we also realize it is so radically different from what we are used to that even aspiring to it seems unrealistic. How, then, can we move from fragmentation to unity, from many things to one necessary thing, from our divided lives to undivided lives in the Spirit? A hard struggle is required. It is the struggle to allow God’s Spirit to work in us and recreate us. But this struggle is not beyond our strength. It calls for a few moments a day in the presence of God when we can listen to his voice precisely in the midst of our many concerns. It also calls for the persistent endeavor to be with others in a new way by seeing them not as people to whom we can cling in fear, but as fellow human beings with whom we can create new space for God.

It is a struggle to grow spiritually, but it can be done. Nouwen says this type of spiritual growth requires us to spend a few moments a day in the presence of God and listen to his voice. We have to practice the presence of God.

Do you have a plan for your spiritual personal development? Most of us don't. But we should? I was speaking to someone recently who decided that she would set spiritual growth goals at the beginning of the year. She decided that she did not want to end the year in the same place where she began the year. Do you have goals for your spiritual development? We set goals for our businesses. We set goals to get in shape and take care of our bodies. We set goals for education. Why don't we set goals for our spiritual development?

Let me ask you a few questions just to get you to think:

- How would your business be going if you spent the same amount of time making plans for your business as you do planning for spiritual growth?
- How would your health and fitness be if you spent the same amount of time on health and fitness as you do your spiritual health?
- What kind of grades would you be making if you spent the same amount of time on your education as you do learning from the Word and other disciples?
- How would your marriage be going if you spent as little time thinking about your spouse as you do thinking about your spiritual development?

Here's the deal, if you want to grow spiritually, you have to plan on growing spiritually. Coming to church on Sundays and at midweeks is a good beginning, but it's not enough. Having a nice quiet time in the morning with a cup of coffee is a good start, but by itself, it's not going to get the job done. Having time with other disciples during the week is wonderful, but that's not all that's needed.

You need a holistic approach to your spiritual life that includes all aspects of your life. Ultimately, you need to spend time thinking about and planning how you want to grow spiritually. You need to set goals and accomplish those goals. You need to include many different spiritual disciplines in your plan of action. You need to understand where you want to be at the end of a month, six months, a year, five years, and ten years. You need to understand what your gifts are and then figure out how you can use those gifts for God. You need to know your strengths and weaknesses. Then you need to strengthen your weakness, but also, don't forget to keep working on strengths so that they become even stronger.

Too many people make this mistake. They work on their weaknesses and forget to keep sharpening their strengths. Then they become discouraged because they seem to be going backwards. Take for example a people person who loves being with people, is great with people, encourages everyone he or she is around, but this person realizes that he or she needs to strengthen the weakness of contemplation, meditation, and study. So this person decides to go into the woods like Henry David Thoreau on Walden Pond to work on study and contemplation. This person would probably come out of that time feeling good about working on his or her weakness, but frustrated at how unplugged they felt from relationships and people. You have to strengthen your strengths and weaknesses at the same time. This is a balanced, integrated, holistic approach to spiritual development. We want to grow the whole person and not just part of the person.

This book will help you develop a plan for your spiritual personal development. It will help you ascertain your spiritual gifts. It will teach you how to make wise, spiritual choices. It will teach you various spiritual disciplines that will help you to connect with God and feed your spirit. It will help you set and achieve spiritual goals in your life.

Spiritual Formation Is Spiritual Transformation

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul writes, “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” This is a goal of spiritual formation. We want to be “transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.” We understand that this transformation “comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” We also understand that the spirit has given us spiritual disciplines that when practiced help us experience the grace of God so that we become transformed into the likeness of Jesus. As we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus, we become more like Jesus in our everyday lives. Bill Hull writes, “Conformity to the image of Christ is to believe as Jesus believed, live as He lived, love as He loved, minister as He ministered, and lead as He led.”⁵

To be transformed, we have to keep our focus on the eternal, not the temporal. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 Paul writes:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. **17** For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. **18** So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

The spiritual disciplines help us focus on the eternal. By focusing on the eternal, instead of the temporary, we can be renewed day by day. That’s what we want—daily spiritual renewal.

The Spiritual Disciplines

As disciples of Jesus, we are all trying to walk the path of the heart on our spiritual journey in life. At times the path is difficult to walk. But God has given us some particular spiritual disciplines that will help us navigate the difficult terrain on this journey toward spiritual maturity. This book is about those disciplines. In this book we will explore the various spiritual disciplines that God has given us to help us mature in Christ. The disciplines are not the goal. They help us reach the goal—maturity in Christ.

Henry Nouwen writes:

⁵ Bill Hull, “Spiritual Formation From the Inside Out,” In *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, Edited by Alan Andrews ([n.pl.]: NavPress, 2010).

The disciplines...focus our eyes on the road we are traveling and help us to move forward, step by step, to our goal. We will encounter great obstacles and splendid views, long, dry deserts and also freshwater lakes surrounded by shadow-rich trees. We will have to fight against those who try to attack and rob us. We also will make wonderful friends. We will often wonder if we will ever make it, but one day we will see coming to us the One who has been waiting for us from all eternity to welcome us home.⁶

The power of the spiritual disciplines come not from the disciplines themselves, but from God. Dallas Willard writes, “At the center of biblical teaching, then, is the idea of an all-loving and all-powerful God who is *in action*, for us and with us. He is not passive. He is not distant. He is not indifferent. ‘He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber’ (Psalm 121:3 NASB)”⁷ Spiritual formation should not be “self-effort;” it should be “God-effort.” Keith Meyer writes, “Now the disciplines are not ways to prove my spirituality but ways to immerse myself in God’s grace and His love for me.”⁸

Spiritual development does include some effort on our part. Philippians 2:12-13 reads, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Sometimes we forget that spiritual growth takes work. It does. You have to work at being more like Jesus. You have to work at reading your Bibles and gaining depth in understanding the Scriptures. You have to work at getting closer to people.

If you are married, then you realize that marriage takes works. Sam and Geri Laing have co-authored an amazing workbook on marriage entitled, *The Essential 8: Principles for a Growing Marriage*. In a seminar that featured this workbook, the Laings talked about five things that every couple needs to do:⁹

- Pray together every day.
- Make dinner together a top priority.
- Once a week: date or have coffee out.
- If possible, retire for evening at the same time.
- Once every four months, go away overnight.

⁶ Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup*, pp. 100-101.

⁷ Dallas Willard, “The Gospel of the Kingdom and Spiritual Formation,” in *The Kingdom Life*.

⁸ Keith Meyer, “Whole-Life Transformation,” in *The Kingdom Life*.

⁹ From a lecture given during the NYCCOC Married Retreat, February 2012.

In *I Choose Us: A Christian Perspective on Building Love Connection in Your Marriage by Breaking Harmful Cycles* by John and Karen Louis, they add one more ingredient to the mix. They recommend couples spend at least 8 each week together talking and communicating. That's an hour a day and then another day with a two-hour time space. They writes:

Personally, we recommend that all spouses spend at least eight hours of undivided attention per week with each other. Undivided attention means just being with each other, talking, getting intimate, even being romantic. This does not include watching TV, being on the computer or phone, or hanging out with the kids. We try to shoot for an hour a day Sunday to Friday and then one date night per week (two hours alone, before joining others).¹⁰

You see it takes work to build a great marriage. Eight hours a week won't just happen on it's own. You have to make plans to spend eight hours together. Date nights won't just happen on their own; you have to plan them.

It also takes work to grow in our relationship with God. Spiritual growth will not happen by accident. It must be intentional.

Keith Meyer writes, "While it is true that apart from Christ we can do nothing, it is also true, that if we do nothing it will be apart from Christ."¹¹ Consider Titus 2:11-14:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

God gives us his grace, and that is an amazing gift. But he gives us his grace so that we can "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions. God's not going to say "No" for us. Some people act as if God's going to step in and miraculously take over their lives and prompt them to make spiritual decisions throughout the day. That's not the way it works. If you want to

¹⁰ John and Karen Louis, *I Choose Us: A Christian Perspective on Building Love Connection in Your Marriage by Breaking Harmful Cycles* (Singapore: Louis Counseling & Training Services Pte. Lte, 2010), pp. 40-41.

¹¹ Keith Meyer, "Whole-Life Transformation," in *The Kingdom Life*.

make spiritual decisions throughout the day, then you have to learn to think spiritually throughout the day. If you do nothing to equip yourself to be a more spiritual person, then you never become a spiritual person.

But when we focus on spiritual transformation, then God does his part and he helps us to change from the inside out. Again, we aren't talking about self-help. We are talking about God-help. This isn't a self-help plan. It's a God-help plan. Richard E. Averbeck writes about the spiritual disciplines, stating:

We are not talking here about a self-help plan but a new road to walk and a new way to do the walking. These disciplines are means of training, not behavioral but spiritual training—that is, training the human spirit under the influence of the Holy Spirit for the transformation of the whole life, inside and out.”¹²

Averbeck continues:

When we do life based on the rest we have in Jesus Christ, the spiritual disciplines are not about working harder. They are ways and means of bringing the empowering the grace of God into our regular daily walk with God, as we rest in Christ. They are ways of putting up our sails, so to speak, to catch the wind of God's Spirit driving us along toward Christlikeness.¹³

In 1 Timothy 4:7 Paul tells his young protégé Timothy, “Train yourself to be godly.” We are to train toward godliness. What does it mean to train? Consider Paul's use of athletic images—the long distance runner, the wrestler, and the prize fighter. All of these athletes go into strict training to become winners. If we are going to become like Jesus, then we have to train to be like Jesus.

What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

What can help us grow spiritually? Practicing the spiritual disciplines can help. What are these spiritual disciplines? Dallas Willard writes, “Well, they are, first of all, *disciplines*. A discipline is any activity within our power that we engage in to enable us to

¹² Richard E. Averbeck, “The Bible in Spiritual Formation,” in *The Kingdom Life*.

¹³ Ibid.

do what we cannot do by direct effort.”¹⁴ Willard adds, “But spiritual disciplines are also *spiritual* disciplines. That is, they are disciplines designed to help us be active and effective in the spiritual realm of our own heart, now spiritually alive by grace, in relation to God and his kingdom.”¹⁵

Dallas Willard’s List of Spiritual Disciplines:¹⁶

Disciplines of Abstinence

Solitude

Silence

Fasting

Frugality

Chastity

Secrecy

Sacrifice

Watching

Disciplines of Engagement

Study

Worship

Celebration

Service

Prayer

Fellowship

Confession

Submission

Willard writes, “The disciplines of abstinence are designed to weaken or break the power of life involvements that press against our involvement with the kingdom of God, and the disciplines of engagement are designed to immerse us ever more deeply into that kingdom.”¹⁷

Kenneth Boa in his excellent book, *Conformed to His Image*, writes, “There is no standardized list of spiritual disciplines, but some are more prominent in the literature than are others.”¹⁸

Boa goes on to give a list of twenty spiritual disciplines:¹⁹

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco: 1998), p. 353.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 418.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 82.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 83-86.

- Solitude
- Silence
- Prayer
- Journaling
- Study
- Mediation
- Fasting
- Chastity
- Secrecy
- Confession
- Fellowship
- Submission
- Guidance
- Simplicity
- Stewardship
- Sacrifice
- Worship
- Celebration
- Service
- Witness

Richard Foster in his book, *Streams of Living Water*, lists six great traditions or streams of the spiritual life.²⁰ These include:

- The Contemplative Tradition: Discovering the Prayer-Filled Life
- The Holiness Tradition—Discovering the Virtuous Life
- The Charismatic Tradition—Discovering the Spirit-Empowered Life
- The Social Justice Tradition—Discovering the Compassionate Life
- The Evangelical Tradition—Discovering the Word Centered Life
- The Incarnational Tradition—Discovering the Sacramental Life

You see there are many ways to list the spiritual disciplines. Every list is a bit different. I like to put all the spiritual disciplines into two categories. One category I call “Dependence on God.” The other category I entitle, “Interdependence with Others.” Richard E. Averbeck adds some useful insight here, as he writes:

²⁰ See Richard Foster’s *Streams of Living Water* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998).

One helpful approach to the discipline is to divide them into two categories, corresponding to human breathing. Recall that 'spirit' also means 'breath.' Like human breathing for physical life, doing spiritual life with God and one another requires an ongoing pattern of breathing in and breathing out. There is a life-giving dynamic relationship between them: (1) *inhaling*: breathing in from God by reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on Scripture; solitude and silence; fasting; and (2) *exhaling*: breathing out toward God and others through prayer and worship; fellowship, service, and mission; living the fruit of the Spirit. Like physical breathing, doing one without the other is to lose life.²¹

Henri Nouwen speaks of a journey inward and a journey outward. This is another way to think of these two categories of the spiritual disciplines. He writes:

Spiritual formation, to use the words of Elizabeth O'Connor, require both a *journey inward* and a *journey outward*. The journey inward is the journey to find the Christ dwelling within us. The journey outward is the journey to find the Christ dwelling among us and in the world. The journey inward calls for the disciplines of solitude, silence, prayer, meditation, contemplation, and attentiveness to the movements of our heart. The journey outward in community and mission calls for the disciplines of care, compassion, witness, outreach, healing, accountability, and attentiveness to the movement of other people's hearts. These two journeys belong together to strengthen each other and should never be separated.²²

Nouwen goes on to write:

The journey inward precedes the journey outward, and the chronology is important. Spiritually, we need to know our selves and God in order to know other people. We need to love our selves and God in order to love each other. Communion with God precedes community with others and ministry in the world. Once the inward journey has begun, we can move outwardly from solitude to community and ministry.²³

The Spiritual Disciplines as We Will Study Them

²¹ Averbeck in *The Kingdom Life*.

²² Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*.

²³ Ibid.

Here is my list of the spiritual disciplines and the order in which we will approach these disciplines in this book. Notice I list twelve spiritual disciplines under two categories.

Part One: Learning Dependence on God.

1. Prayer.

2. Fasting.

3. Meditation.

Silence. Solitude. Reflection.

4. Bible Study.

Journaling. Memorization.

5. Worship.

Celebration.

6. Surrender.

Trust. Submission. Obedience. Guidance. Suffering. Self-Denial.

7. Repentance.

Confession.

Part Two: Learning Interdependence with Others.

8. The One Another Way.

Fellowship. Mentoring/Discipling. Confession.

9. Evangelism.

Missions.

10. Simplicity.

Frugality.

11. Service.

The Servant Heart. Sacrifice. Giving. Ministry.

12. Sanctifying the Ordinary.

24-7 Discipleship. Living An Everyday, Ordinary Life for God.

Spiritual formation is a process that sharpens our attentiveness to God and helps us to be more and more like Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit. These practices are shaped by our temperament and personality type. Finally, in all spiritual formation and development, it is important to remember that spiritual formation does not propel us on a journey. A journey is an exploration without a destination. The joy of the journey is in the exploration and discovery along the way. Christian spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the glory of God and for the sake of others (II Corinthians 3:17-18). The focus of spiritual formation is the Holy Spirit, who guides the ongoing journey. The response is submission. The guide is trained as a spiritual director. Spiritual formation focuses on the ordinary maturing of one's relationship with God. Discipleship focuses on the maturing of one's faith in the context of the particular beliefs and values of a faith community. Spiritual formation may refer either to the process and practices by which a person may progress in one's spiritual or religious life or to a movement in Protestant Christianity that emphasizes these processes and practices. It may include, but is not limited to, Specific techniques of prayer and meditation. A focus on spiritual disciplines and practices. Reference to historical religious philosophy and techniques.