

Growing Spiritually

Advance in Faith 1, Unit 6



Week 1 – A Royal Priesthood



1. Introduction

Scripture is littered with references to the importance of every believer maturing in their faith journey, such as:

Hebrews 6:1-3
 1 Corinthians 14:20
 Ephesians 4:11-14
 Colossians 1:9-10
 2 Peter 3:17-18

The notion of Christian spiritual growth might conjure up thoughts like Romans 12:2 (“be transformed by the renewing of your mind”) and Philippians 1:6 (“He who begun a good work in you will carry it through to completion.”). But, what are we being transformed into? What does ‘completion’ look like?

The early Christians held out a breathtaking, radical vision of the ultimate goal of all things: the new heaven and new earth, the renewal of all things, the new Jerusalem “coming down from heaven to earth” (Revelation 21:2), a world flooded with the joy and justice of the God who made it in the first place.¹

John in Revelation goes on to describe our role as saved people, in this newly restored creation.

Revelation 22:3-5 (ESV)

“No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever”.

Within the description of the restored creation we find explicitly stated our role as a royal priesthood. We are to be kings and priests who rule and worship.

Revelation 1:5-6; 3:21; 5:9-10
 1 Peter 2:9

This role has its roots in Genesis 1 & 2.

Gen 1:26
 Gen 2:15
 Exodus 19:4-6
 Isaiah 61:6

¹ Tom Wright., *Virtue Reborn*, (London: SPCK: 2010) p68

Worship and stewardship, generating justice and beauty: these are the primary vocations of God’s redeemed people. And the habits of heart, mind and life to which we are called are designed to form us, gradually and bit by bit, into people who can, with the hard-won “second nature” that we call virtue, freely and gladly take forward these tasks.²

The habits of the heart, mind and life to which Wright refers include what have become known as “Spiritual Disciplines”. These are different habits of living that scripture encourages us to develop so that we might fulfil the role of ‘priest and king’ now and in the age to come.

Richard Foster lists a dozen classic disciplines in his book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989.) It is these that we will study over the next 5 weeks. But the goal of this unit is not just to know about the ‘disciplines’ but to begin to practice them as well.

Discipline		Description
Inward	Meditation	Stillness to be with God (not emptiness) Chewing Scripture (climb inside)
	Prayer	Communing with God; thinking his thoughts; desiring what he desires; becoming the friend of God.
	Fasting	Going without food and other things that control us.
	Study	Personal transformation, by concentration, comprehension, reflection.
Outward	Simplicity	Seeking God’s kingdom, not my gain. Freedom from the tyranny of things, self, and other people.
	Solitude	Isolation from clamour; the terrifying silence of listening to God.
	Submission	Freedom to yield to God and others (family, neighbours, believing community, broken/despised, world)
	Service	Choosing the towel. Hospitality, listening, courtesy, bearing burdens, especially when no one sees.
Corporate	Confession	Acknowledging my sin/failure to others; absorbing their evil so as to heal, forgive, redeem.
	Worship	Living with the glory of God as my life-goal.
	Guidance	Seeking God together; waiting until we hear him together.
	Celebration	Sharing the joy of who God is; springs from provision, place and personality functioning as God designed.

² Tom Wright., *Virtue Reborn*, (London: SPCK: 2010) p72

2. Why bother?

Discipline takes energy and determination. Like getting fit, or losing weight, it does not happen by sitting back and waiting for it. Paul uses these analogies:

2 Timothy 2:3

*“Endure hardship with us like a good **soldier** of Christ Jesus. ⁴ No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer. ⁵ Similarly, if anyone competes as an **athlete**, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules. ⁶ The hardworking **farmer** should be the first to receive a share of the crops. ⁷ Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*

Discipleship means living for a higher cause. The soldier’s energies are given to what his officer commands. The athlete’s schedule and diet are dictated by training for a purpose. The farmer’s days are spent to create a harvest. A **disciple** is a disciplined one: focused on what Jesus commands, going without for a greater purpose, working towards a great harvest.

The danger of doing

In a performance-oriented culture, we are evaluated by what we do instead of who we are. However, God designed us as human beings, not human doings.

Remember Mary and Martha? With the crowds of people following Jesus, Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made and tried to coerce Mary into a role that was not Mary’s to fulfil. Mary just sat at Jesus’ feet, listening to him. She chose the shape that best allowed her to be with Jesus in that moment.

Don’t view the disciplines as something else to do. View them as opportunities to be with him:

- **Prayer** is being with God, conversing with him.
- **Meditation** is being with God, in focused thought.
- **Fasting** is being with God, being nourished by his presence.
- **Study** is being with God, wrestling with issues.
- **Simplicity** is being with God, saturated with his care of others.
- **Solitude** is being with God, away from the clamour of the world.
- **Submission** is being with God, the ultimate Servant.
- **Service** is being with God, in “the least of these” (Mt 25:40.)

- **Confession** is the openness that springs from being in his presence.
- **Worship** is the lifestyle of being in his presence.
- **Guidance** is the shared awareness of his presence.
- **Celebration** is the response to his presence.

The disciplines are devotion to the person who invites us to be with him.

“In meditation, we are growing into what Thomas á Kempis calls ‘a familiar friendship with Jesus.’ ... ‘He walks with me and he talks with me’ ceases to be pious jargon and instead becomes a straightforward description of daily life”.³

Conclusion

The spiritual disciplines, then, are about focusing on God. They are not about what they will do for us, nor our need to do them. As Richard Foster says:

“The life that is pleasing to God is not a series of religious duties. We have only one thing to do, namely, to experience a life of relationship and intimacy with God”.⁴

Memory Work:

1 Peter 2:9

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

³ R. Foster, *op cit*, p.23

⁴ R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989) p. 4

Group Questions:

- What are some of the things that come to mind when you consider your role as a priest and ruler in the new earth?
- What does spiritual growth currently look like in your context?
- Do you have any experiences with any of the spiritual disciplines that you would care to share with the group?
- Which of the disciplines is most effective in leading you into God's presence at this time?
- Are there any disciplines you have either sought to avoid or never engaged with before?
- Which of the disciplines are you most looking forward to learning about and why?

Take Home Exercise:

The recommended reading for this unit is *Richard Foster's Celebration of Discipline*.