

Growing Spiritually

Advance in Faith 1, Unit 6



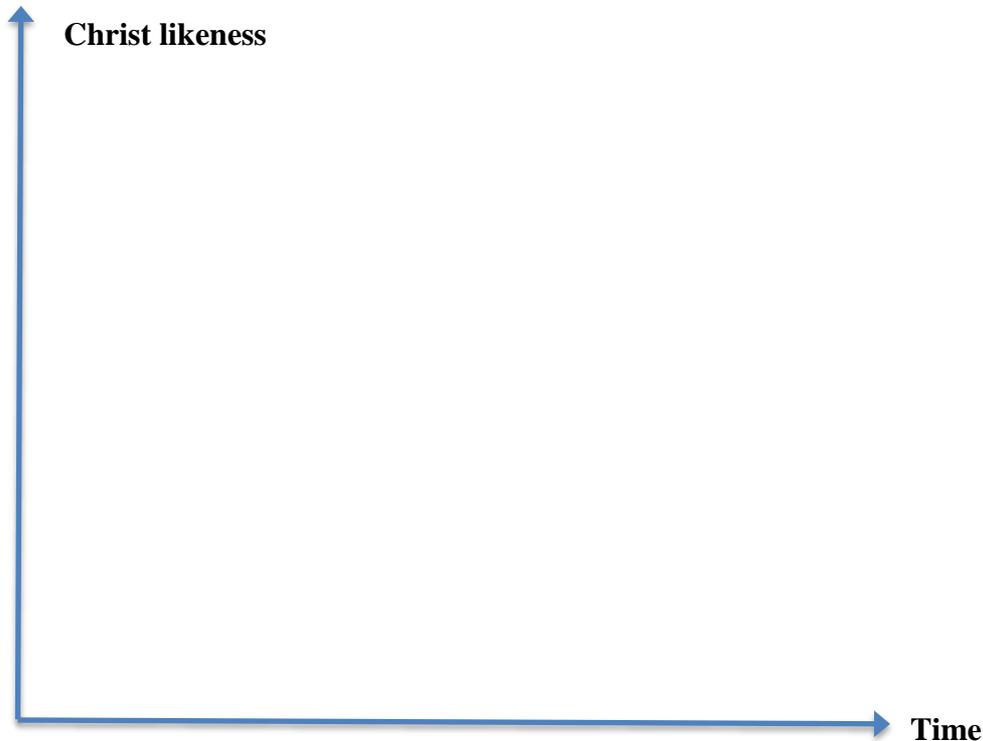
Week 2 – Prayer and Study



INTRODUCTION

“God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us. The apostle Paul said, ‘he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life’ (Gal. 6:8). A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is to provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He puts the seed into the ground where the natural forces take over and up comes the grain. That is the way with the Spiritual Disciplines – they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The Disciplines are God’s way of getting us into the ground; they put us where He can work within us and transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God’s means of grace. The inner righteousness we seek is not something that is poured on our heads. God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we are placed where He can bless us” (Richard Foster).¹

If you were to graph your spiritual journey, what would it look like?



¹ R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), p. 6.

THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Mark 3:13-15

“And He went up on the mountain and called to Him those He Himself wanted. And they came to Him. Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons.”

Our primary calling as disciples is to BE WITH HIM.

Our secondary calling is to BE SENT OUT BY HIM.

Our success and fruitfulness in the latter is dependent on our faithfulness and commitment to the former.

1. PRAYER

What Is Prayer?

“Prayer is communication with God. Prayer is possible because the triune God is personal, and has so revealed himself that men and women, made in his image, may address him by name.” (E. P. Clowney)²

Prayer is to the soul of a believer what breathing is to the body. You can't live (spiritually) without it. Reduce the amount of oxygen to your lungs and brain and eventually you become tired, weak, and disorientated. So it is with prayer. Cease to commune and fellowship with God and soon you will find yourself feeling lost and confused, not knowing clearly who you are, where you are or why you seem to be stumbling through life.

Prayer is ultimately an expression of our **dependency** on God. When we pray we acknowledge that He is the Vine and we are merely the branches (John 15) – without Him we can do nothing!

² E. P. Clowney, “Theology of Prayer,” in S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1988), p. 526.

Jesus On Prayer**Matthew 6:5-7**

“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. When you pray, don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!”

In this portion of scripture Jesus gives instruction to His disciples concerning prayer and three times He uses the phrase “when you pray”. Notice the presupposition that as one of His disciples you will indeed be praying. Having emphasised the fact that it is expected that the disciple pray He then gives them some clear guidelines as to how to pray.

Jesus taught that prayer should be marked by at least 3 things:**1) SINCERITY (vs. 5)**

Prayer ought to be an authentic expression of personal thoughts and feelings to God while in conversation with Him at any time necessary and at any time at all.

2) SECRECY (vs. 6)**Why would Jesus encourage us to pray in the secret place as opposed to praying in a public place?**

“Secret place” – Greek: *tameion*, which means “storehouse, storage chamber, storeroom.” It is thought to refer to a small room in the centre of the house used to store keep food. It had no windows (in order to preserve the food from light damage) and, thus, no one could see inside the room.

Jesus is addressing the issue of motive. In the secret place, before God alone, it is impossible to be anything but real. You can’t fool Him, you can’t pretend with Him, you can’t hide anything from Him, you can’t manipulate Him and you can’t get Him to believe something about you that isn’t true. In the secret place, where there is no-one but

you and God, you stand face to face with His truth and light and you are stripped naked of all pre-tense and falsehood. It is only in the secret place that you discover who you truly are and what the true nature of your relationship with God really is.

Contrastingly, in the company of others, we always attempt to put our best foot forward, to impress those around us, to find their favour, their acceptance and their approval, even if it means exaggerating ourselves in order to do so.

The secret place is a place of absolute honesty and it is for that reason that God would have us meet Him there first. Of all the spiritual disciplines, the one that no one can see whether you're doing it or not is secret prayer.

3) SIMPLICITY (vs. 7)

Prayer needn't be complex in order to be effective.

2 Corinthians 11:3 - *"I fear that you may be led astray from the simplicity that is in Christ."*

A life of devotion to Jesus is not as complicated as we sometimes make it and our prayer life need not be any more complex than an honest conversation with God.

Other Church Leaders On Prayer:

James 5:13-18 (NKJV)

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit"

1 Peter 3:7 (NLT)

"In the same way, you husbands must give honour to your wives. Treat your wife with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life. Treat her as you should so your prayers will not be hindered"

Colossians 4:2

“Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart”.

Philippians 4:6-7

“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus”.

“Of all the Spiritual Disciplines prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father...it is the Discipline of prayer that brings us into the deepest and highest work of the human spirit. Real prayer is life creating and life changing.”³

The Rhythm of Prayer

In his book, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools For Prayer*,⁴ Eugene Peterson writes about the passive and active rhythm of morning and evening prayer. In the Hebrew world, the new day started at sundown, thus their 24-hour cycle started with rest (passivity) and concluded with work (action).

Psalm 4: a passive, reflective evening prayer about trusting God by putting your worries into His hands. Give your worries over to God so that you can rest well. Take 15 minutes at the end of the day to pray until you feel the day’s burdens are lifted.

Psalm 5: an active morning prayer that seeks to address the issues of the world. It is *spontaneous* (you listen to your “heart sighs”) and *disciplined* (you pray regularly until you see change). Take time in the morning to pray in accordance with God’s will into situations and circumstances that your heart leads you to pray for.

Pray In Accordance With God’s Will

If prayer is more than presenting a shopping list of requests to God for Him to fulfill, if we are to pray in accordance with God’s will, then how do we do this? Tim Keller suggests three things for certain and a fourth if God blesses:

³ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 42.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

1) BIBLE READING

Choose a passage and read it 3-4 times. Make three separate lists:

- a. What does this teach me about God?
- b. What does this teach me about me?
- c. Are there any examples to follow/avoid, commands to obey or promises to claim?

2) MEDITATION

This entails talking to yourself about God, before God.

Psalm 103:1-2

Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

Two questions to help focus on this step:

- a. How would I be different if I truly believed this?
- b. Why is God highlighting this to me today?

3) PRAYER

Pray through the things that have been highlighted to you in your meditations using the ACTS acronym:

- a. ADORATION – what can I praise God for that I see in this passage?
- b. CONFESSION – what wrong behaviour, harmful emotions or wrong attitudes occur in me when I forget this verse?
- c. THANKSGIVING – How is the grace I have in Jesus the key to help me overcome the sin I just confessed?
- d. SUPPLICATION – what do I need to do or become in light of this?

4) CONTEMPLATION

The soul's inward vision and the heart's simple repose in God.

This is God's gift to us. It cannot be achieved by will, but comes from a life devoted to Bible study, prayer and meditation.

Meditate until the Holy Spirit begins to preach to you. If this doesn't occur, then simply finish off your time by praying through your meditations as per step three.

2. STUDY

“He that studies only men, will get the body of knowledge without the soul; and he that studies only books, the soul without the body. He that to what he sees, adds observation, and to what he reads, reflection, is in the right road to knowledge, provided that in scrutinising the hearts of others, he neglects not his own.”

Charles Caleb Colton.

Remember, the purpose of the spiritual disciplines is the total transformation of the person; the replacing of old destructive habits with new life-giving ones. Romans 12:2 says that we are transformed by the *renewing* of our mind. The mind is renewed by applying it to those things that will transform it.

Philippians 4:8

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

The discipline of study is the primary vehicle to bring us to “*think* about these things.” The mind will always take on an order conforming to the order upon which it concentrates. When this is done with concentration, perception and repetition, new thoughts and habits are formed. This is why God instructed the Israelites to write the Laws on their doorposts and tie them to their wrists and foreheads (Deut. 11:18).

Study is the devotion of TIME and ATTENTION to the acquisition of KNOWLEDGE and UNDERSTANDING.

Although study and meditation will often overlap, they constitute two distinct experiences. Study provides a certain objective framework within which meditation can successfully function.

- 1) Meditation is DEVOTIONAL.
Meditation will *relish* a word.
- 2) Study is ANALYTICAL.
Study will *explicate* a word.

THE FOUR STEPS OF STUDY

1) REPETITION.

Regularly channelling the mind in a specific direction, thus ingraining habits of thought.

2) CONCENTRATION.

Focus on what is being studied. Centre the mind and attention.

3) COMPREHENSION.

Seek understanding of what is being studied. It is the *knowledge* of the truth that will set you free (John 8:32). Comprehension leads to insight and discernment.

4) REFLECTION.

This defines the *significance* of what is being studied. It brings us to see things from God's perspective. We also come to understand ourselves as well as our subject matter.

METHODS OF STUDY**1) BIBLE STUDY**

For the follower of Jesus, the Bible is the primary source of revelation about God. It is therefore essential for every believer to devote significant amounts of time and energy to the study of scripture as an essential component of their devotion to Christ.

Ezra 7:10

“For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”.

While there are many useful tools (i.e. reference books, commentaries, lexicons, dictionary's, study aids, etc.) available to support the study of scripture, meaningful study will never occur without a deep love for and dedication to the task.

It is also important to note the difference between the study of Scripture and the devotional reading of Scripture.

Bible study focuses on INTERPRETATION.

Devotional reading focuses on APPLICATION.

2) OTHER SOURCES

Accessing the thoughts and ideas of others is an integral part of forming your own. Biographies and commentaries by other Christian (and to a lesser degree non-Christian) authors, speakers and thinkers are vital to forming a Christian worldview and deepening faith.

3) STUDY SESSIONS AND COURSES

Formalising study by enrolling in a Bible College, University or church-based program (like Foundations) is a great way of building the discipline required for meaningful study into your weekly routines.

CONCLUSION

Remember, the spiritual disciplines are “healthy relational practices” for they enable us to maintain and deepen (“healthy”) our relationships with God (“relational”) on a regular basis (“practices”).

Prayer is being with God, conversing with him.

Study is being with God, wrestling with issues.

Group Questions:

- What positive experiences have you had of these two disciplines?
- Are there some aspects of these two disciplines that you have found difficult?
- Discuss with the group ways of managing your prayer and study that may be helpful, e.g. time, place, resources.
- What structures have you personally found useful when trying to build the discipline of prayer into your life?
- What role does prayer play in your current spiritual journey?
- How easy/difficult do you think the prayer structure discussed would be to implement in your life? Do you have any concerns or queries about it?
- Take a moment to chart your faith journey on the graph provided in the introduction. Share with the group anything that stands out.

Take Home Exercise:

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

Next Week:

We will discuss the Disciplines of Fasting and Meditation.

Memory Work:

Philippians 4:6-7

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.