

## **Making Space for God to Fill and Transform**

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Too often in our busyness we confine God to a small corner of our existence, barely aware of his presence. In contrast Paul encourages us to "be filled with the Spirit." The tense he uses indicates that we need to "keep being filled with the Spirit." This means having a maximum relationship with God, in which we experience him as the greatest reality.

Consequently, his Spirit has maximum freedom work in and through our lives, shaping us and empowering us to become fruitful disciples. How can we open ourselves to God's Spirit and provide freedom for him to do his work?

Spiritual disciplines serve a two-fold purpose in reducing distractions and obstacles to the spiritual life and in enabling growth in our relationship with God. They create inner and outer space in our lives, freeing our minds and spirits to hear God's voice and to cooperate with his Spirit. As a result, he can transform us into the image of Christ and empower our lives, enabling us to do what he calls us to do. Spiritual disciplines fit Paul's instruction to Timothy, "Train yourself to be godly" (I Tim 4.7).

Since good books on the disciplines already exist, I will not rehash what they have ably covered. Instead, I will focus on the values of ten basic disciplines for

growth in discipleship. I will also discuss two forms of prayer which receive scant mention—what I term kingdom prayer and transforming prayer—which serve vital roles for discipleship. In addition, I will make a case for considering giving, which usually does not make the list, as an important spiritual discipline.

### **Solitude and Silence: Making Space for Hearing God**

Daily living immerses us in a myriad of human interactions, influences, and demands. Our schedules bloat with work responsibilities, along with family, church, and community commitments, and leisure activities—while the noises of civilization envelop us. The average American home, for example, keeps a television switched on for over seven hours a day, often while viewers do something else simultaneously. Ipods® enable us to carry our entertainment of choice with us everywhere. Media messages by the thousands bombard us through electronic, visual, and print sources. We "live in a culture that conspires to drown out silence and fill all the pauses."<sup>1</sup> In such a world can we hear God's small, still voice?

Solitude involves withdrawal from people and pressures to be alone with God. "Without solitude it is virtually

impossible to live a spiritual life," wrote Henri Nouwen.<sup>2</sup> Silence, a natural accompaniment of solitude, means excluding speech and sounds other than those of nature. Many of the other disciplines rest on the foundation of solitude and silence. On a number of occasions the Bible tells us that Jesus took time to be alone with the Father (Matt 4.1, Matt 14.23, Mark 1.35, Luke 5.16, Luke 6.12-13, John 6.15).

Solitude and silence contribute in three ways to spiritual growth. First, they reveal our inner selves. When we withdraw from the external world, we discover a multitude of inner distractions. "An inner chaos opens up in us," which the outer distractions had obscured.<sup>3</sup> These include negative emotions, secret desires, strong memories, anxieties, and even tasks to be done. When tasks intrude into my thoughts during times of solitude, I simply write down what I need to do. This alleviates my concern that I might forget to do them. We can take more serious thoughts and feelings that intrude as subjects for prayer.<sup>4</sup> This turns an obstacle into an opportunity for growth.

Second, solitude and silence enable us to see ourselves and God's actions in the world more clearly. When the outer and inner chaos subsides, we gain a better perspective. "Muddy water becomes clear if you only let it be still for awhile."<sup>5</sup> With perspective comes a greater awareness of how we need to live and grow. Third, they free us from outward things that would distract our attention from God and what he would say to us. Jesus taught, "My sheep listen to my voice" (John 10.27).

Getting away from home disconnects us

from our normal routines and responsibilities, and should be the preferred option for longer periods of solitude. We can find extended solitude by withdrawing to a quiet park, nature center, or retreat grounds. When I lived in San Francisco, sometimes I would drive to the beach nearby and spend time in solitude and silent prayer. For briefer periods we can take advantage of times when we are alone in the house, or when the rest of the family sleeps. Walks and driving also provide opportunities for solitude and silence.

We can easily rationalize that we do not have time for solitude. Someone demolished this excuse for me with the observation, "It is inconceivable to think that God would give us so much to do that we can no longer spend extended time with Him."<sup>6</sup> If busyness keeps us from special times with God, we must conclude that we are doing things he has not called us to do and living outside of his will.

### **Study and Meditation-Internalizing Truth**

Two other essential disciplines are the study of God's Word and meditation on it. Through the Word we come to understand God, his laws, ourselves, and the world. The Apostle Paul tells us that all Scripture is God-breathed and therefore useful for "training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3.16-17). Often wrong beliefs hold us in bondage. For this reason Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8.32).

In study we analyze a portion of

scripture to better understand it. Too often, however, we forget it as soon as we close our Bibles, minimizing the value of study. When we meditate, we reflect on a verse, a part of a verse, or short portion of scripture, turning a biblical truth over and over in our minds during the course of the day. This helps us to internalize and apply it, so that God's Word becomes a personal word for us. As this occurs the Word nourishes and transforms our spirits. For the person who desires blessing, the Psalmist advised, "His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (1.2). Such a person will become strong and mature, producing fruit and finding success (1.3).

### **Prayer-Seeking God's Kingdom and Our Transformation**

As Christians we recognize prayer as a basic discipline for developing and maintaining their relationship with God. We learn various types of prayers: praise and adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition. As generally practiced, petitioning prayer focuses on our needs and circumstances. These prayers have been thoroughly explored by many writers, and require no further explanation here. Instead I will focus on two kinds of neglected prayers, which especially help believers to grow in discipleship.

#### *Kingdom Prayer*

God cares about our needs, but he also wants us to go beyond them to pray for his purposes in the world as well. I call these *kingdom prayers*. A child focuses on his own needs, while an adult takes interest in his parents' concerns. In the

same way, maturing believers need to concern themselves with God's purposes. The Lord's Prayer (Matt 6.9-13), through which Jesus taught his disciples the appropriate pattern for prayer, outlines the threefold nature of kingdom prayers: for God's name—which stands for his person—to be revered, for his reign to be established, and for his purposes to be accomplished. The fact that these requests precede the requests for personal needs indicates that they should have priority. Through kingdom prayers, we align our hearts with God's purposes and gain spiritual victories over the forces of darkness (Matt 12.29, Eph 6. 12).

In specific ways disciples need to pray kingdom prayers for their families, fellow believers, the Church, those who do not know God, and themselves. Leaders should model kingdom prayer in worship services, Bible classes, fellowships, and small groups. Kingdom prayer should become the quintessential prayer for disciples.

#### *Transforming Prayer*

All types of prayer contribute to our spiritual growth. However, we commonly neglect one of the most important kinds of prayer for this purpose. I term these transformational prayers, because we pray for lives to be changed, including our own. Prayer to become more like Jesus should become a daily practice for both disciplers and disciples. We need to pray transforming prayers for one another as well. In Paul's letters to the churches in Ephesus and Colossae we find three examples of this type of prayer. (See Eph 1.17 -19, 3.17 -19, Col 1.9-11.)

In the first prayer, for example, Paul prays for spiritual grasp of four important truths that, when internalized, will powerfully shape believers: that they will have personal, experiential knowledge of God, that they will know the hope to which they have been called, and that they will know "the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints." This conveys the stunning truth that God considers us his prized possession. Disciples need to pray these prayers regularly for themselves and others. Disciple-makers also need to pray them for those whom they seek to disciple.

### **Fasting-Learning Freedom and Self-Denial**

We fast when we voluntarily abstain from food (and sometimes drink). We may also choose to abstain from other activities on which we have become dependent or which occupy too much of our lives—such as television, the Internet, sports, or shopping. A nationwide study, for example, found that up to fourteen percent of computer users recognized that they spend too many on their computers, sometimes neglecting work, school, families, food, and sleep.<sup>7</sup>

Fasting has at least five values for growth in discipleship. First, it reveals the appetites and emotions that control our lives. During times of fasting, I have found myself more easily irritated or short-tempered than usual. This exposes my dependence on physical comfort and satisfaction to act in a Christian spirit, indicating that the fruit of the Spirit must continue to mature in me. Second, we practice self-control by disciplining our appetites and delaying the satisfaction of an essential physical need. This carries over into other parts of our lives. Third,

we practice self-denial, which all believers must learn in order to take up their crosses and follow Jesus (Matt 16.24). In an indulgent consumerist society, this is especially important. Fourth, we express outwardly and thus reinforce inwardly our complete dependence on God (Ezra 8.21-23). We recognize that on our own we cannot live a life pleasing to God or fulfill our God-given mission. Even Jesus in his humanity fasted for forty days in preparation for his life mission (Matt 4.1-2). Finally, many have found that the spiritual focus involved in prayer with fasting helps them to discern the leading God's Spirit for their lives. This happened at the church in Antioch, when they realized that they should release two key leaders, Barnabas and Saul, for itinerant ministry in spreading the gospel (Acts 13.2-3).

### **Simplicity-Moving from Superficial to Essential**

Not only do we live overly busy lives, but we clutter our lives with too many things. A consumption oriented society values wealth and possessions, while the advertising industry spends tens of billions of dollars a year creating desire for even more. We seek fulfillment and security in things, while trying to impress others with what we have. These factors compound the lust for acquisition. Authentic living, as God intends for us, gets buried beneath the crush of busyness and materialism.

Jesus warned, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matt 6.19-21). Studies confirm that beyond meeting basic needs, money does not bring greater contentment.<sup>8</sup> It can, however, diminish the quality of our

spiritual lives.

The practice of simplicity trains us to abstain from acquiring and owning anything unnecessary, freeing us from preoccupation with things that won't satisfy. It mutes the desire to earn more to acquire even more and encourages us to distinguish between the unnecessary from what really matters. It also reduces the drive to self-gratification and our proneness to anxiety. In addition, simplicity enables us to better appreciate and enjoy those things we do have.

Finally freedom from the *superficial* allows us to concentrate on the *essential*: We can more easily focus on knowing God and his purposes for our lives. We can also devote more attention to the people in our lives. By spending less on ourselves, we have more to give to assist the materially and spiritually impoverished and victims of injustice. Finally, we have more time and energy to apply ourselves personally to kingdom purposes.

### **Giving-Freeing Ourselves and Reinforcing Truth**

Giving for God's kingdom purposes is not usually listed as a spiritual discipline. I have found, however, that done regularly in the right spirit, it serves as a powerful discipline. Three spiritual benefits accrue from it. First, it loosens the power that money and possessions have in our lives (Matt 6.24). What we regularly and cheerfully give away (2 Cor 9.7), can no longer control us. Instead of being our master, it can become a servant for God's purposes.

Second, giving expresses and reinforces

an appropriate relationship to God. It indicates our gratitude to him for all that he is and for all that he has done. It also expresses the fact that our trust is not in what we have, but in God, who provides everything we have (1 Cor 4.7). Furthermore, in giving we recognize his lordship over all that we have. In addition, giving reinforces the passion and priority of our lives. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6.21).

The third benefit of giving comes from identifying with and participating in God's purposes through it. This is one way of seeking first his kingdom (Matt 6.33), as we contribute to the physically and spiritually needy. It gives meaning to our lives and a sense of significance that we are making a difference in the lives of others.

### **Confession-Enabling Growth and Experiencing Grace**

As individuals, we should confess our failings regularly to God in prayer. However, the Scriptures also call us to "confess your sins to each other" (1 Jm 5.17). What makes it important to do so? I have experienced six ways it enables change and growth. First, before we confess a sin to others, we can still minimize, rationalize, or excuse it in our hearts. Now we recognize the need for change. Second, it undermines our tendency to project a positive image of ourselves to others, which is the spirit of pride.<sup>9</sup> When others do not really know us, however, they cannot help us to grow. Third, confession makes us accountable to others and therefore lessens the likelihood that we will repeat the offense. Fourth, they can also pray for us that we will be strengthened to

avoid temptation and find healing for this area (Jam 5.16). Fifth, it helps to create an authentic community, where members know one another beyond polite facades. In an atmosphere of trust and vulnerability, we grow in the freedom to uncover weaknesses we had previously suppressed and to deal with them. Finally, confessing to others can bring a more complete experience of God's forgiveness (John 20.23). Experiencing God's forgiveness through others frees us to serve God with the joy of the truly forgiven and to grow in unfettered relationship with him.

### **Submission-Reducing Self- Will**

In the world people strive for control, power, and position. They demand their rights and insist on getting their way. To do so, they scheme and manipulate. As Christians we may not do these things blatantly, but we are not immune. What can break the power of these compulsions?

The discipline of submission to others attacks the problem of self-will in our lives. The apostle Paul clearly taught believers to practice it (Eph 5.21). Submitting to others does not mean becoming a doormat on which others freely exercise their self-will. Rather, it means considering people's feelings, opinions, and needs, and looking out for their interests (Phi 2.2-4). The more we learn to do this, the less we feel the need to insist on our rights, control a situation, or get even. Paul's reflection on love states that love "is not self-seeking" (I Cor 13.3).

### **Serving in Secret—Moving from Self-Absorption to Self-Giving**

Jesus stunned his disciples in the upper

room, when began washing their feet, as the lowliest servant in a household. Afterwards he explained, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13.15). Life is not about ambition, success, getting our own needs met, and being well served by others, Jesus was saying. Rather, his disciples should give of themselves to meet the needs of others. Indeed, Jesus' entire life involved taking "the very nature of a servant" (Phi 2.7)

Serving does not need to be done as a discipline, but can simply be an act of obedient discipleship. It functions as a discipline, however, in training us away from pride, self-absorption, and the need to be in charge, while developing humility and self-giving love. Doing service in secret as much as possible prevents the possibility of self-promotion. Serving without taking credit reinforces in us the understanding that life is not about receiving applause or rewards.<sup>10</sup>

### **Worship—Aligning with Reality**

With worship and celebration we come to two spiritual disciplines for both individual and corporate practice. Because God is the greatest reality in the universe, worship is the action that most aligns with reality. God does not need worship. We do. To fail to worship is to ignore reality, putting us in danger of living in unreality in other aspects of our lives. True worship pulls us away from self-focus—the major problem of humans—to focus on God. When we sincerely worship, we reinforce his reality in our minds and spirits, increase the likelihood that we will live rightly. True worship is the natural response of our hearts to the reality of God. In

worship His Spirit touches our spirits. Our spontaneous response is adoration, delight, awe, and worship

### **Celebration-Gaining Perspective and Refreshing**

Paul instructs, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice" (Phi 4.4). Celebration focuses on all that God has done for us individually and corporately as the body of Christ. God instituted Israel's festivals as a means for his people to do so on a regular basis.

Without ignoring life's harsh realities, national celebrations called for the people to express gratitude for the blessings they enjoyed instead of the sorrows they had endured.

Today celebration gives us positive perspective in a fallen, cynical world. We do not deny the suffering and injustices, but we determine to concentrate on God's goodness and gifts to us. We choose to enjoy and rejoice. The gratitude and joy we feel gives us strength to resist temptation and to serve him with renewed vigor. "The joy of the LORD is our strength," declared Nehemiah (Neh 8.10c). In acknowledging God's provision, we

learn to relax and not to take ourselves so seriously. We also enjoy the good things of life and refresh our spirits.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus claimed, "I have come that you may have life, and it to the full" (John 10.10).

No scriptural principles surpass gratitude and celebration for experiencing a joyful life. For those who lack thankfulness, even abundant wealth, pleasures, and achievements bring little enduring joy. Those with little, but possessing a grateful heart, can taste what Jesus offers.

### **Summary**

Growth in discipleship does not occur primarily through human effort, but through the work of God's Spirit in our lives. We cooperate by opening ourselves to this divine working.

Spiritual disciplines help us to remove the distractions and clutter of life and focus on God. They also assist in reducing negative qualities from our lives and strengthening positive ones.

These values make spiritual disciplines essential means for becoming more like Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the [n]visible God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2000),85.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen in Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith, eds., *Devotional Classics* (Harper San Francisco, 1993),95.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Richard Foster in *Devotional Classics*, 98,

<sup>5</sup> Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1998),358

<sup>6</sup> Source unknown

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Krieger, "Survey Finds Many Trapped in Web of Internet Addiction," *San Jose Mercury News*, October

20, 2006. Stanford University conducted this study of 2,500 adults, the first attempt to quantify Internet addiction in the general population.

<sup>8</sup> David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven: Yale University

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Press, 2001),131.

<sup>9</sup> Mark R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996),179.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 112

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 158.