

“Spiritual Disciplines That Build Godly Men”
Developing Habits that Strengthen Your Christian Walk

Session One: An Introduction to Spiritual Disciplines

We begin our tenth year together today on this first Saturday of the New Year.

Opening Questions: Where are you on your spiritual pilgrimage? Is anyone satisfied that they are as far along as they would like to be?

Today we begin a brand, new study designed to help us in our Christian walk. Before we delve in let me share one caveat: This is a topical study, which is not my favorite style. I prefer chapter and verse studies where we move in an exegetical manner (explain and interpret). But I think this study is so important that I am moving from my strength and comfort zone. Of course as we deal with different topics in this genre of spiritual disciplines, we will look at lots of Scripture. It just won't be in a verse-by-verse fashion.

So, let's delve in to this study, “Spiritual Disciplines That Build Godly Men.”

Patrick Morley tells about a man who came to him and said half-jokingly, “Tell me how to be good. I already know how bad I am.” Maybe you can relate to that. Possibly when you look in the mirror you don't like what you see, because you are keenly aware of all your faults. Of course Satan loves for us to dwell on our weaknesses and imperfections, because he wants us to live defeated lives. So even men who want to live good lives often fall into ruts and fail to grow to the glory of God. For example, various surveys reveal that for every ten men in church:

- 9 will watch at least one of their children walk away from the church
- 8 do not find their jobs satisfying
- 6 pay only the monthly minimum on their credit balances, and are heavily in debt
- 5 have a major problem with pornography
- 4 will get divorced, often dealing with deep guilt
- Only 1 will have a biblical worldview
- And, all 10 will struggle to balance work and family

Now I don't mention that to beat anyone up or to try and be negative this morning. Rather, I quote those numbers because they reveal that even most men in church suffer from regret and guilt, and wind up living in a rut. Few ever truly grow the way God intends. That's where the spiritual disciplines enter in.

Years ago, as a college student, I read the classic by Richard J. Foster entitled *Celebration of Discipline*, which you may have read at some point as well. It is pretty deep, but the book introduces the reader to various spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, study, meditation, confession, service, worship and solitude. Although the book is a little heavy at times it taught me a valuable truth: that spiritual disciplines are really just spiritual habits we develop by which we cultivate a deeper relationship with God. If we want to grow in our faith, and become godly men, husbands, and fathers, we need to develop and exercise these disciplines.

Think about an athlete putting in time at the gym, running and lifting weights. Most don't develop such a regiment because they love pumping iron – because that is their favorite thing to do with their spare time. Rather they want to be stronger and faster and have more endurance. And in many cases they want to look better and feel better. So there is an end to the means. And the same is true of spiritual disciplines.

Word of warning: We don't develop and exercise spiritual disciplines to please God or make Him happy. It isn't as if we are earning his favor by doing these things. Instead the disciplines exhibit to God how serious we are about following Him, and they allow Him to build us up in the faith. If we truly want to grow in our relationship with Christ (get stronger and have more endurance) there is no other way. Spiritual growth takes work – real concerted effort. That is why we use the term spiritual discipline! If it was easy everyone would do it – but it takes determination and perseverance.

Now, with that basic definition established, let me ask another question: How does God communicate with us today? I don't think He speaks to us through burning bushes or pillars of fire – at least that isn't the norm. In fact it never has been. But God does communicate with us, and the spiritual disciplines are all about hearing His voice, and listening to Him. In fact briefly let me mention the four ways I believe God communicates to us (which will also serve as a bit of an outline for where we are going in this study):

- 1. Through His Works.** God's handiwork makes a powerful statement. It screams out that there is a God who is in control. **Read Psalm 19:1-4a.** Now theologians refer to this as "general revelation." In other words it is the way God reveals Himself generally to everyone. Paul, in Romans 1 makes it clear that due to creation men are without excuse – in other words, even without the Bible you have to be a fool to be an atheist because you are rejecting the obvious. Listen to Romans 1:18-20:

¹⁸*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,*

¹⁹*since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.*

²⁰*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

So the first thing we will look at in this study is God's creation – which will allow us to talk about solitude and meditation. That may sound boring or overwhelming but it is really all about seeing God in creation, and worshiping Him. It is about taking the time to be still and observe what He has made. If you like nature, which most men do, then this is great news – God wants you to spend time outside with Him in His creation.

2. **Through His Word.** Go back to **Psalm 19 (read vs. 7-11)**. Did you catch that? Theologians call this “special revelation.” Special revelation is not available to all people at the same time like general revelation. Instead it refers to the way God reveals Himself to specific people at specific times and places. This includes prophecy or Scripture which was revealed by God to certain men who wrote it down, but also speaks of God's appearances to people, and to miracles performed for specific audiences. However, the primary way God speaks to our hearts with specific truth for our lives is through His Word. God spoke to specific men who recorded His Word and as we read Scripture it speaks to our hearts in very specific ways. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* So our second session will be about the Bible and the importance of the discipline of Scripture reading and study.
3. **Through the Whisper of the Holy Spirit** (had to keep the alliteration going). Now, we all know that as obedient believers we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. But most Christians (especially men) never seem to connect with or hear the whispers of the Spirit. It is kind of like a radio. Just because you have it does not mean that you will hear anything. You have to turn it to the right frequency (story of Jamie Johnson – coming to CCU from Michigan – told her Mom she needed an Ohio radio!) The Spirit speaks to us in various ways, but we have to be tuned in. So, we will talk about some of the disciplines that allow us to hear Him: prayer, fasting, worship, and godly counsel. We'll also talk about spiritual

warfare and how Satan seeks to counteract the work of the Spirit. Winning this war requires the spiritual discipline of putting on the armor of God.

- 4. Through the Witness of Fellow Believers.** One of the ways God speaks to us (encouraging, challenging and comforting us) is through fellow Christians. So we'll talk about the spiritual discipline of fellowship (which is both for us and other believers) but also consider some disciplines that allow us to minister to others like stewardship, service, and evangelism. I am not saying that we give or serve just for others. No, we do it as part of our worship to God and out of obedience, but it certainly allows us to minister to other people. And things like giving and service are just as important in the list of spiritual disciplines as are prayer and fasting.

As you can see we have a lengthy list of disciplines that we will be covering. Put together they will allow us to hear God's voice, and to grow in our relationship with Him.

Of course before we set out on this journey it is imperative that we have spiritual desire. God has provided the tools or the exercises but we have to use them. It is like walking into the gym that is full of all kinds of exercise equipment and weights. Everything you need to get into shape and grow stronger is provided but you have to want to grow enough to use the tools. David wrote, in Psalm 42:1-2, *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?"* I pray you have that kind of desire and will return the next 10 weeks as we deal with these different disciplines.

The church reformer John Wesley, who was a powerful preacher and hymn writer, was one of the most disciplined Christian men in history. Listen to one of his prayers, which summed up his desire, and I hope will be true for you and me:

Heavenly Father, because You have been pleased to give me Your holy laws as the Rule of my life, In the name of Jesus Christ, I willingly put my neck under Your yoke and set my shoulder to Your burden...And, subscribing to all of Your laws as holy, just and good, in the name of Jesus Christ, I solemnly take them as the Rule of my words, thoughts and actions; promising, in the name of Jesus Christ, that...I will order and govern my whole life according to Your direction and will not allow myself in the neglect of anything that I know to be my duty.

Are you ready to allow God to govern your whole life? Are you ready to do whatever it takes to grow? If so, this next ten weeks is going to be an awesome adventure.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Which of the spiritual disciplines mentioned excites you most to study?
2. Which one do you think is most needed in your life?
3. Which do you believe is most difficult to attain?
4. Look again at Psalm 42. What do you think David means when he says, "My soul pants for you, O God?"