

Spiritual Disciplines – 1

By Pastor Alan Utting



'Take, Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my whole will, all that I have and all that I possess. You gave it all to me, Lord; I give it all back to you.'

Ignatius of Loyola

In his work *Celebration of Disciplines*, Richard Foster asserts that the classical spiritual disciplines—'meditation, prayer, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, suffering, and celebration—are instrumental in cultivating a profound inner life imbued with significant joy'. This discussion will provide an overview of selected disciplines from a ministry perspective.

Bible Perspective

'Whoever heeds discipline shows the way to life' (Proverbs 10:17).

Observations

The living Word - 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4).

1. The deceased evangelist Billy Graham frequently emphasized the authority of scripture in his sermons by stating, 'The Word of God says...'. While you may not use the same expression, do you share a similar conviction regarding the Bible as the embodiment of divine truth?
2. Avoid using sermon preparation as a replacement for your personal time with the Lord. Maintaining your own spiritual vitality is essential to inspire others.
3. If you're feeling spiritually dry, use devotional aids or switch Bible translations.
4. One writer creatively put it this way, 'In prayer we talk to God, and in the study of the Bible God talks to us – and you had better let God do most of the talking' (author unknown).

Prayer - Madam Guyon: 'reading scripture is a way into prayer.'

1. As a new pastor, our church meetings began and ended with brief prayers, but most of the time was spent on business. Later in another church I learned that prioritising extended prayer at the start made our meetings more effective and efficient. Incorporating prayer throughout the meeting also proved beneficial.
2. Engaging in written or traditional prayers, such as those demonstrated by Jesus in the 'Lord's Prayer' and reading biographies of notable individuals devoted to prayer throughout history, can serve as valuable sources of inspiration.
3. Don't forget the importance of fasting in prayer. Jesus did it and likewise encourages us to do it.

Solitude - 'When I have sufficient slowing-down time alone, I find that my activity is marked by a deep, loving communion with God. 'Peter Scazzero

1. Jesus often went into a lonely place to pray, 'Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed' (Mark 1:35). What an example to follow.

2. The biggest distractions to solitude come through having an overactive mind, using social media platforms and overwork. I can relate to all of these. To remain focused in ministry I try and eliminate or reduce the influence of some of these distractions. For example, I may have a *media* fast where I will not look at emails and social Platforms. People sometimes pride themselves in multitasking, but that pushes God and others out into the fringes.
3. Susanna Wesley's children understood that her apron over her head in the kitchen meant she was praying and shouldn't be interrupted. Brother Lawrence also practiced solitude amid the bustle of his kitchen work. People like Thomas Kelly also emphasised the importance of living constantly in an attitude of prayer throughout the day no matter what was happening.

Worship – 'the pure loving gaze that finds God everywhere.' Brother Lawrence

1. King David was a worshipper and modelled to others his love for God. How are you doing? R. A. Torrey was a very famous Bible teacher and evangelist in his time. On holiday with his family, they visited a small church where the pastor was a poor speaker. His son was surprised how his father's eyes were riveted on the pastor, so his son quizzed him about that afterwards. 'Reuben, I attend church to worship God – not just to hear the preacher. Whoever is speaking, if your heart is receptive, you shall receive. Even some train of thought may be started which will help you.' We must never lose our hunger for more of God.
2. Try not to become rigidly set to certain forms of worship styles. Growing up in a conservative worship environment it was a challenge to express my love to God through the raising of hands and even dance like David did. Breaking through those barriers however brought about a new freedom of expression of my love for Jesus.
3. Attitude of heart is more important than the outward form. Draw upon others to give a lead in worship especially if they are particularly gifted in that area.

Service - 'he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet' (John 13:5).

1. We all agree that true leadership begins with a servant heart. But what humble tasks can you take on to demonstrate that spirit? Could you serve others coffee, empty the wastepaper bins, or even clean the toilets if needed? I recall a time when toilets need cleaning and our mission director insisted on doing just that—to save me the job! It could mean going the extra mile when you're weary, helping with building repairs or painting, or quietly serving in unseen, menial roles. Remember, actions speak louder than words.
2. Good relationships are the basis of effective ministry'. Don't come into your environment as the expert on everything as people don't like that but live as a humble servant of the Lord. An experienced doctor I know arrived in a developing country recently and when talking to other local doctors asked for their help as they knew more about tropical diseases than he did. That won them over.

Resources:

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*

Ignatius, *Developing Intimacy with God* – 'Spiritual Exercise'