

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY 203: FOUR INWARD SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Jesus said: *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”*
(Matthew 7:24-25)

INTRODUCTION

What are “spiritual” practices? It sounds a bit esoteric, but it really isn’t: spiritual practices are just the usual things we do as a church and the usual habits that a church promotes for its members. The table below is a summary; we’ll look at each in more detail later on. There are twelve and this primer will focus on the first four – the inward practices. Primers on the rest will follow.

| <i>The Twelve Spiritual Practices¹</i> | | |
|--|----------------|------------------|
| Inward | Outward | Corporate |
| <i>Meditation</i> | Simplicity | Confession |
| <i>Prayer</i> | Solitude | Worship |
| <i>Fasting</i> | Submission | Guidance |
| <i>Study</i> | Service | Celebration |

There is nothing new or earth-shaking in these. Worship, prayer, study and service are all spiritual practices that are regularly happening at our parish and all over the Anglican Communion. This primer is just a recapitulation of these. It is intended as a guide for personal reflection and recommitment and as a framework for future reference.

¹ Taken from Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 1978, 1998. Known hereafter as *Celebration*.

Before we take a closer look at the practices themselves in this primer, we will first review the following points:

- a) how spiritual practices fit into the Way of Life;
- b) how discipline works in spiritual practices; and
- c) how our spiritual practices benefit us.

a) *The Way and its Spiritual Practices*

Christianity is not first a set of beliefs. First, it is a Way of Life. It was the enemies of the first followers of Jesus who first called them “Christians.”² Amongst themselves, the first followers knew it as “*The Way*.”³ Their community codes of conduct stated it as the very first point:

“There are two ways, one of life, the other of death, and between the two ways there is a great difference.”⁴

The Way begins with *conversion*: accepting Jesus as our Christ, which means that for us Jesus is God’s “anointed one.”⁵ We transfer our *allegiance* from the world to Jesus. Ideally, nothing in the world would now have our complete allegiance; everything now becomes qualified and governed by our prior allegiance to Jesus.

In reality, transferring our complete allegiance to Jesus takes a *lifetime*. Over time, we grow in: (1) *ethical behaviour*, and (2) in *spiritual wisdom*. These are the twin drivers of *transformation and sanctification* as we become open to the indwelling of the holy Spirit.

² *The Acts of the Apostles* 11:26.

³ *Acts* 9:2, 19:9, 19:23, 22:4, 24:14, 24:22. With regards to “The Way,” please see the primer “Christian Ethics 101: The Two Ways.”

⁴ In *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*. Translated by Aaron Milavec. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Michael Glazier, 2003. The word *didache* means teaching/training in Greek. The *Didache* is the code of conduct of one of the first Jewish-Christian communities, written very early, possibly around 50 C.E., contemporaneous with the letters of Paul to the Hellenistic communities in Roman Europe.

⁵ *Acts* 10:38

(1) What are Christian ethics?

Christian ethics consists basically of living a healthy, simple, and compassionate life within a community of care such as our parish. Our ethics are based on the parts of our tradition closest to Jesus:

- the *ethical teachings of Jesus* in the gospels, primarily in the Sermon on the Mount;⁶
- the *codes of conduct* of the first Jewish (Christian) communities of the Way of Life;⁷ and
- the *virtue ethics* of the Christian tradition, which map onto the ethical teachings of Jesus.⁸

(2) What is Christian spirituality?

Christian spirituality is the process of personal conversion away from self-centredness towards self-giving over a lifetime of growing allegiance to Jesus on the Way of Life. It consists of:

- gaining in *spiritual wisdom* - through learning from our sacred scriptures,⁹ our Anglican tradition, and our reason;
- practicing a number of *the twelve spiritual practices* - some by ourselves, some with our parish, and some in community; and
- opening up to *the indwelling of the holy Spirit* - which works with us on transforming our shadow side and guides us to becoming whole persons capable of flourishing, self-giving, and sanctification.

So, that is where the spiritual practices fit into the Way of Life. By the way, as one can see, these twelve practices are not about “self-improvement,” although self-improvement is a welcome and happy by-product.

⁶ In the *Gospel of Matthew*, chapters five to seven. (My hope is to work next on a primer for the Sermon on the Mount.) Luke contains a shorter version in chapter six.

⁷ Please see the primer “Christian Ethics 101: The Two Ways.”

⁸ Please see the primers “Christian Ethics 102: Character and Virtue” and “Christian Ethics 103: The Four Cardinal Virtues.”

⁹ Please see “Christian Spirituality 202: On Spiritual Knowledge.”

b) The Role of Discipline in Spiritual Practices

Before we explore the practices, let's review the need for, and the difficulties of, *the concept of "discipline"* in learning and maintaining habits. The word comes from the Latin *disciplina*, from the word *discipulus*, meaning pupil, student, learner, as in a "*disciple*" of Jesus.

Meanings in the word discipline¹⁰

These are:

1) *Training*, expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.

2) *Control*, in these three senses:

i) *Compliance*, control obtained by enforcing compliance or order (e.g., military discipline);

ii) *Self-Control*, controlled behavior resulting from disciplinary training (e.g., dieting takes a lot of discipline);

iii) *A State of Order*, based on submission to rules and authority (e.g., a teacher who demands discipline in the classroom);

3) *Punishment*, intended to correct or train (e.g., the judicial penal system: by the way, have you ever seen that actually work?¹¹);

¹⁰ Based on the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th Edition. Accessed at <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/discipline>

¹¹ I remember a quote in James Michener's novel *The Drifters* that said: "The only thing that imprisonment has ever demonstrably cured is heterosexuality."

4) *A Rule*, as in a set of rules or methods (e.g., those regulating the structure, management, and practices of a parish or a monastic order);

5) *A Branch of Knowledge*, or teaching (as in the discipline of mathematics).

Spiritual practices are concerned only with some of these meanings:

- 1) *discipline as training* to produce the character and behaviours of a Christian saint-in-formation;
- 2.ii.) *discipline as inner self-control* (as in one of the cardinal virtues) and 2.iii.), *discipline as an internal state of order*, in the sense of creating internal order, meaning and purpose within oneself as a learner, a disciple of Jesus; and,
- 5) discipline in the sense that the spiritual practices of all the saints over the past two millennia have produced the *branch of knowledge we call spiritual wisdom*. No new generation ever has to reinvent the wheel; it's all there in our tradition.

In summary, the role of discipline within spiritual practices is in *training, self-control, internal order, and wisdom*. The practices have nothing to do with compulsion, compliance, or punishment.

Discipline is something with which all of us have trouble at the best of times. The secret ingredient for success in learning a new practice is *accountability to a trusted person or group*. An example is Alcoholics Anonymous. One of the purposes of a parish community is to be such for its members as they strive to learn and practice the spiritual practices that appeal to their personalities as vehicles of personal *transformation and sanctification* into the communion of saints.

c) *The Benefits of the Twelve Practices*

The spiritual disciplines of the Christian Way of Life have numerous benefits. Think of it as *primary health care* aimed at the prevention of *the spiritual diseases of the Way of Death*.

The present pandemic is an example of the importance of primary health care. Through the social practices of staying home, mask wearing, and social distancing, we prevent the personal and family hardships and suffering of catching the virus. We also prevent the social hardships of scarce resource-allocation, unending care-giving, and the loss of productive citizenship. Similarly, engaging in some of the practices of the Way builds up *the spiritual immune system*.

The spiritual immune system of a Christian travelling on the Way works more or less as follows. They embody into one's being the universal chain of causation:

Sow a thought and you reap an action;
sow an act and you reap a habit;
sow a habit and you reap a character;
sow a character and you reap a destiny.¹²

Ah, but where's the fun in that? Well, most of what folks call fun centres around instant gratification and has problematic side effects over the long term. A life focused on fun as instant gratification quickly becomes very complex, difficult to manage, and stressful.

A more disciplined life that practices primary spiritual care tends to become simplified over time, filtering out impurities like a water filter. A simple life has more natural, longer-lasting fun because it has much less stress and side-effects. It's like a spring's source that has been cleared of obstruction and can now flow freely.

¹² I've searched: this saying is ascribed to every 19th century thinker and their uncle. I think it is a good summary of Aristotle's thought :=)

These days (which are just like in the old days) few people are taught the benefits of practices that embody discipline and virtue. Most folks have to learn it by themselves, sometimes positively, and other times the hard way. (Will Rogers used to say: “There's three sorts of people in this world: those who learn by books, those who learn by the experiences of others, and those who just have to pee on the electric fence every now and then.”)

Paul wrote this in his letter to the Christians at Rome:

Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect.¹³

This must be understood: a life of individualized instant gratification - unconscious consumerism, unengaged citizenship, unrestrained by compassion, unbounded by community or personal responsibility - is a life on the Way of Death. The best way to be transformed by the renewing of our minds is to engage in as many of the spiritual practices as is feasible within our personal circumstances.

What we need is a good guide to the practices. *Richard Foster* is a Quaker scholar who has focused on the spiritual practices over a life time.¹⁴ His foundational work is *Celebration of Discipline*, from 1978,¹⁵ in which he describes the twelve major practices.

A note on terminology: Foster calls them “disciplines,” but language changes over time. Since the 1970s when he wrote his classic,

¹³ *Letter to the Romans* 12:2. NRSV translation, <https://bible.oremus.org/>

¹⁴ For an idea of the extent of Forster’s resources on the disciplines, please see his author’s page on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.ca/kindle-dbs/entity/author/B000APVBQW?encoding=UTF8&node=916520&offset=0&pageSize=12&searchAlias=stripbooks&sort=author-sidecar-rank&page=1&langFilter=default#formatSelectorHeader>

¹⁵ Foster, *Celebration*. My hope for these primers is that readers would buy his books!

the word “discipline” has gained some negative connotations. We can see now how powerful people in the world and in the church have enforced “discipline for thee, but not for me.” It is better to *harness discipline together with humility under the authority of grace and see it as a “practice,”* one in which discipline is necessary but not sufficient.

Foster divided the practices into three categories:

- the *inward*
- the *outward*
- the *corporate*

Here again is the summary outline.

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This aide-mémoire is *a brief introduction to the inward practices*. It consists of *quotations* on the topics from Foster’s classic book. The hope is that readers will be reminded of the practices and be encouraged to take up some that have lapsed.¹⁶

If you would like to *buy the book*, look it up on Amazon and then go get it from an independent bookseller. Please see one such link from Alibris below.¹⁷

The text follows:

¹⁶ This primer is only an introduction. I hope (*D.V.*) to explore individual practices more fully in future primers and add some practical ideas from Foster’s extensive resources.

¹⁷ <https://www.alibris.com/Celebration-of-Discipline-The-Path-to-Spiritual-Growth/book/980174?qsort=p&matches=667>

From Richard Foster's Introduction:

The apostle Paul says,

“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” (Galatians 6:8).

Paul's analogy is instructive. A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground, he plants the seed, he waters the plants, and then the natural forces of the earth take over and up comes the grain. This is the way it is 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...

In this regard it would be proper to speak of *“the path of disciplined grace.”* It is “grace” because it is free; it is “disciplined” because there is something for us to do.¹⁸

(pto: please turn over)

¹⁸ *Celebration*, p.7-8.

When Richard Foster uses the old word “Discipline,” please read it as “Practice.” The word “Practice” contains some of the meanings of “discipline,” as discussed in the introduction. It leaves out the connotations of punishment and adds room for divine grace.

Grace is like the divine electrical grid and a spiritual practice connects us to the circuit like the plug of an appliance connects to the electrical grid provided by an outlet. Foster means it in this sense. With him, (and Bonhoeffer) we would say, a spiritual practice is “the path of disciplined grace” (p.8).

A. THE INWARD PRACTICES

1. MEDITATION

Psychiatrist Carl Jung once remarked, "*Hurry is not of the Devil; it is the Devil.*" If we hope to move beyond the superficialities of our culture, including our religious culture, we must be willing to go down into *the recreating silences*, into the inner world of *contemplation*.¹⁹

a) *Hearing and Obeying*

Christian meditation, very simply, is *the ability to hear God's voice and obey his word*. It is that simple. I wish I could make it more complicated for those who like things difficult. It involves no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into the cosmic consciousness.²⁰

b) *The Purpose of Meditation*

What happens in meditation is that we create *the emotional and spiritual space* which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart.²¹

c) *Preparing to Meditate*

Find a place that is *quiet and free from interruption*. No telephone should be nearby. If it is possible to find some place that looks out onto a lovely landscape, so much the better. It is best to have one designated place rather than hunting for a different spot each day...

What about *posture*? In one sense posture makes no difference at all; you can pray anywhere, any time, and in any position. In another sense, however, posture is of utmost importance.

¹⁹ *Celebration*, p.15. Please read "meditation" in the sense of "contemplation."

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

The body, the mind, and the spirit are inseparable... I think the best approach would be to find a position that is *the most comfortable and the least distracting*... I find it best to sit in a straight chair, with my back correctly positioned in the chair and both feet flat on the floor...²²

d) *The Forms of Meditation*

(1) Meditation upon Scripture

Whereas the study of Scripture centers on exegesis,²³ the meditation of Scripture centers on *internalizing and personalizing the passage*... It is important to resist the temptation to pass over many passages superficially. Our rushing reflects our internal state and our internal state is what needs to be transformed. Bonhoeffer recommended spending a whole week on a single text! Therefore, my suggestion is that you take a single event, or a parable, or a few verses, or even a single word and *allow it to take root in you*.²⁴

(2) Centering Down

It is a time to become still, to enter into *the recreating silence*, to allow the fragmentation of our minds to become centered.

The following is a brief exercise to aid you in "re-collection" that is simply called "*palms down, palms up*."

Begin by placing your *palms down* as a symbolic indication of your desire to turn over any concerns you may have to God... Whatever it is that weighs on your mind or is a concern to you, just say, "palms down." Release it. You may even feel a certain sense of release in your hands.

²² *Celebration*, p.28.

²³ The word exegesis means the exposition or interpretation of any literary production or passage; in particular, that of scripture.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.29

After several moments of surrender, turn your *palms up* as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord... Whatever you need, you say, “palms up.” Having centered down, spend the remaining moments in complete silence. *Do not ask for anything*. Allow the Lord to commune with you, to love you. If impressions or directions come, fine; if not, fine.²⁵

(3) Meditation on Creation

So, give your *attention to the created order*. Look at the trees, really look at them. Take a flower and allow its beauty and symmetry to sink deep into your mind and heart. Listen to the birds - they are the messengers of God. Watch the little creatures that creep upon the earth. These are humble acts, to be sure, but sometimes *God reaches us profoundly in these simple ways* if we will quiet ourselves to listen.²⁶

(4) Meditation on Events and Inner Meaning

We have a *spiritual obligation to penetrate the inner meaning of events, not to gain power but to gain prophetic perspective*.

Thomas Merton writes that the person

“who has meditated on the Passion of Christ but has not meditated on the extermination camps of Dachau and Auschwitz has not yet fully entered into the experience of Christianity in our time.”

We would do well to hold the events of our time before God and ask for *prophetic insight* to discern where these things lead.

Further, we should ask for *guidance* for anything we personally should be doing to be salt and light in our decaying and dark world.²⁷

²⁵ *Celebration*, p.30-1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.32. The quote is from *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, 1960, pp. 88-89.

2. PRAYER

Prayer is such a vast and multifaceted subject that we instantly recognize the impossibility of even lightly touching on all its aspects in one chapter. ... There is *discursive prayer, mental prayer, and centering prayer*. There is *the prayer of quiet, the prayer of relinquishment, and the prayer of guidance*. And many more...

Since restriction often enhances clarity, this chapter will be confined to *the prayer of intercession*; that is, learning how to pray effectively for others.²⁸

a) *Learning to Pray*

I am so grateful I did not wait until I was perfect or had everything straight before praying for others, otherwise I would never have begun. P. T. Forsythe says, "*Prayer is to religion what original research is to science.*" I felt I was engaging in "original research" in the school of the Spirit. It was thrilling beyond description. Every seeming failure led to a new learning process.²⁹

To understand that the work of prayer involves *a learning process* saves us from arrogantly dismissing it as false or unreal.

If we turn on our television set and it does not work, we do not declare that there are no such things as electronic frequencies in the air or on the cable. We assume something is wrong, something we can find and correct. We check the plug, switch, circuitry until we discover what is blocking the flow of this mysterious energy that transmits pictures. We know the problem has been found and fixed by seeing whether or not the TV works.

²⁸ *Celebration*, p.35-6. The quote is from Thomas Merton *Contemplative Prayer*, 1969, p. 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.38.

It is the same with prayer. We can determine if we are praying correctly if the requests come to pass. If not, *we look for the "block"*; perhaps we are praying wrongly, perhaps something within us needs changing, perhaps there are new principles of prayer to be learned, perhaps patience and persistence are needed. We listen, *make the necessary adjustments, and try again*. We can know that our prayers are being answered as surely as we can know that the television set is working.³⁰

Listening to the Lord is the first thing, the second thing, and the third thing necessary for successful intercession. Søren Kierkegaard once observed:

“A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that *prayer is listening*.”

Listening to God is the necessary prelude to intercession. The work of intercession, sometimes called the prayer of faith, presupposes that the prayer of guidance is perpetually ascending to the Father. We must hear, know, and obey the will of God before we pray it into the lives of others. The prayer of guidance constantly precedes and surrounds the prayer of faith. *The beginning then in learning to pray for others is to listen for guidance*.³¹

b) The Foothills of Prayer

We must never wait until we feel like praying before we pray for others. *Prayer is like any other work*; we may not feel like working, but once we have been at it for a bit, we begin to feel like working. We may not feel like practicing the piano, but once we play for a while, we feel like doing it. In the same way, our prayer muscles need to be limbered up a bit and once the blood-flow of intercession begins, we will find that we feel like praying.

³⁰ *Celebration*, p.38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.39. The Søren Kierkegaard quote is from *Christian Discourses*, 1940, p. 324.

3. **FASTING**

In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, *fasting* seems out of place, out of step with the times... What would account for this almost total disregard of a subject so frequently mentioned in Scripture and so ardently practiced by Christians through the centuries? Two things.

First, fasting has developed a bad reputation as a result of the *excessive ascetic practices* of the Middle Ages...

Second, the *constant propaganda* fed us today convinces us that if we do not have three large meals each day, with several snacks in between, we are on the verge of starvation. This, coupled with the popular belief that it is a positive virtue to satisfy every human appetite, has made fasting seem obsolete. Anyone who seriously attempts to fast is bombarded with objections.³²

Fasting, of course, is not an exclusively Christian Discipline; *all the major religions of the world* recognize its merit. Zoroaster practiced fasting as did Confucius and the Yogis of India. Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle all fasted. Even Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, believed in fasting.³³

a) Is Fasting a Commandment?

Although many passages of Scripture deal with this subject, two stand out in importance.

The first is Jesus' startling teaching about fasting in the *Sermon on the Mount*. Two factors bear directly on the issue at hand. His teaching on fasting is directly *in the context of his teaching on giving and praying*. It is as if there is an almost unconscious

³² *Celebration*, p.47-48.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.48.

assumption that giving, praying, and fasting are all part of Christian devotion. We have no more reason to exclude fasting from the teaching than we do giving or praying. Second, Jesus states, “When you fast . . .” (Matthew 6:16). He seems to *make the assumption that people will fast*, and is giving instruction on how to do it properly.³⁴

The second crucial statement of Jesus about fasting comes in *response to a question* by the disciples of John the Baptist. Perplexed over the fact that both they and the Pharisees fasted but Jesus' disciples did not, they asked “Why?” Jesus replied, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matthew 9:15)... The most natural interpretation of the days when Jesus' disciples will fast is the present Church age...³⁵

b) The Purpose of Fasting

It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with *the question of motive* (Matthew 6:16-18). To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion...John Wesley declares,

“First, let it [fasting] be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven.”

That is the only way we will be saved from loving the blessing more than the Blessor.³⁶ Once the *primary purpose of fasting* is firmly fixed in our hearts, we are at liberty to understand that there are also *secondary purposes in fasting*.

³⁴ *Celebration*, p.52. The full teaching of Jesus: ¹⁶And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:16-18)

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.53.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55. The quote is from John Wesley *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 1938, p. 301.

More than any other Discipline, *fasting reveals the things that control us*. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately... Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear - if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger; then we will realize that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.³⁷

Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them. Paul writes, “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels.³⁸

c) The Practice of Fasting

As with all the Disciplines, *a progression should be observed*; it is wise to learn to walk well before we try to run.

(1) *Begin with a partial fast* of twenty-four hours' duration; many have found lunch to lunch to be the best time. This means that you would not eat two meals. Fresh fruit juices are excellent to drink during the fast. Attempt this once a week for several weeks. In the beginning you will be fascinated with the physical aspects of your experience, but the most important thing to monitor is the inner attitude of the heart. Outwardly you will be performing the regular duties of your day, but inwardly you will be in prayer and adoration,

³⁷ *Celebration*, p.55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.56.

song, and worship. In a new way, cause every task of the day to be a sacred ministry to the Lord. However mundane your duties, for you they are a sacrament. Cultivate a “gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.”³⁹ Break your fast with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetables and a good deal of inner rejoicing.

(2) After two or three weeks you are prepared to attempt a normal *fast of twenty-four hours*. Drink only water but use healthy amounts of it...If the taste of water bothers you, add one teaspoon of lemon juice. You will probably feel some hunger pangs or discomfort before the time is up. That is not real hunger; your stomach has been trained through years of conditioning to give signals of hunger at certain hours.

In many ways the stomach is like a spoiled child, and a spoiled child does not need indulgence, but needs discipline. Martin Luther says “the flesh was wont to grumble dreadfully.” You must not give in to this “grumbling.”⁴⁰ Ignore the signals, or even tell your “spoiled child” to calm down, and in a brief time the hunger pangs will pass. If not, sip another glass of water and the stomach will be satisfied. You are to *be the master of your stomach, not its slave*. If family obligations permit it, devote the time you would normally use eating to meditation and prayer.⁴¹

It should go without saying that you should follow Jesus' counsel to *refrain from calling attention to what you are doing*. The only ones who should know you are fasting are those who have to know. If you call attention to your fasting, people will be impressed and, as Jesus said, that will be your reward. You, however, are fasting for far greater and deeper rewards.⁴²

³⁹ The quote is from Thomas R. Kelly *A Testament of Devotion*, 1941, p. 35.

⁴⁰ The quote is from Arthur Wallis *God's Chosen Fast*, 1971, p. 25.

⁴¹ *Celebration*, p.57.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.57-8.

4. STUDY

The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is *the total transformation of the person*. They aim at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the Discipline of study. The apostle Paul tells us that we are *transformed through the renewal of the mind* (Romans 12:2). The mind is renewed by applying it to those things that will transform it... The Discipline of study is the primary vehicle to bring us to “think about these things.”⁴³

Many Christians remain in bondage to fears and anxieties simply because they do not avail themselves of the Discipline of study. They may be faithful in church attendance and earnest in fulfilling their religious duties, and still they are not changed... Why? Because they have never taken up *one of the central ways God uses to change us: study*.

Jesus made it unmistakably clear that *the knowledge of the truth will set us free*. (John 8:32). Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us... Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free. This principle is true in every area of human endeavor. It is true in biology and mathematics. It is true in marriages and other human relationships.

But it is especially true in reference to the spiritual life. Many are hampered and confused in the spiritual walk by *a simple ignorance of the truth*. Worse yet, many have been brought into the most cruel bondage by false teaching.

[Jesus said] “You traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15).⁴⁴

⁴³ *Celebration*, p.62. The quote is from Paul's *Letter to the Philippians* 4:8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.63.

What Is Study?

Study is a specific kind of experience in which through careful attention to reality the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction. Remember, *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, ingrained habits of thought are formed.⁴⁵

We must once again emphasize that the ingrained habits of thought that are formed will conform to the order of the thing being studied. What we study determines the kind of habits that are formed, which is why Paul urges us to focus on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious.⁴⁶

The process that occurs in study should be distinguished from meditation. *Meditation is devotional; study is analytical.*

Meditation will relish a word; study will explicate it.

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

In study there are two “books” to be studied: *verbal and nonverbal.*

Books and lectures, therefore, constitute only half the field of study, perhaps less.

The world of *nature and*, most important, the careful observation of *events and actions* are the primary nonverbal fields of study.⁴⁷

Study involves *four steps.*

⁴⁵ *Celebration*, p.63.

⁴⁶ *Letter to the Philippians* 4:8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.64.

a) Repetition

Repetition regularly channels the mind in a specific direction, thus *ingraining habits of thought*. We may smile condescendingly at the old teaching method of recitation, but we must realize that sheer repetition without even understanding what is being repeated does affect the inner mind. Ingrained habits of thought can be formed by repetition alone, thus changing behavior.⁴⁸

b) Concentration

Concentration is the second step in study. If, in addition to bringing the mind repeatedly to the subject matter, the person will *concentrate on what is being studied*, learning is vastly increased. Concentration centers the mind. It focuses the attention on what is being studied...We live in a culture that does not value concentration. Distraction is the order of the day... Most people find it virtually impossible to go through an entire day focusing on a single thing. We are the lesser for this dissipation of our energies.⁴⁹

c) Comprehension

When we not only repeatedly focus the mind in a particular direction, centering our attention on the subject, but *understand what we are studying*, we reach a new level.⁵⁰

Jesus, as you remember, reminds us that it is not just the truth but the knowledge of the truth that sets us free (John 8:32).

Comprehension focuses on *the knowledge of the truth*. All of us have had the experience of reading something over and over and then, all of sudden, we understand what it means. This “*eureka*” experience of understanding catapults us onto a *new level of growth and freedom*. It leads to *insight and discernment*. It provides the basis for a *true perception of reality*.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Celebration*, p.64-5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.65.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.66.

d) Reflection

One further step is needed: *reflection*. Although comprehension defines what we are studying, *reflection defines the significance of what we are studying...* Reflection brings us to see things from *God's perspective*. In reflection we come to *understand not only our subject matter, but ourselves*. Jesus speaks often of ears that do not hear and eyes that do not see. When we ponder the meaning of what we study, we come to hear and see in a new way.⁵²

It soon becomes obvious that *study demands humility...* Not only is study directly dependent upon humility, but it is conducive to it. Arrogance and a teachable spirit are mutually exclusive.⁵³

4.1. Study of Books

To convince people that they must *learn* to study is the major obstacle. Most people assume that because they know how to read words, they know how to study...When we read a book, *three intrinsic and three extrinsic rules* govern our study.⁵⁴

a) Three intrinsic rules

The *intrinsic rules* may, in the beginning, necessitate three separate readings but in time can be done concurrently.

(1) The first reading involves *understanding* the book:
what is the author saying?

(2) The second reading involves *interpreting* the book:
what does the author mean?

(3) The third reading involves *evaluating* the book:
is the author right or wrong?

⁵² *Celebration*, p.66.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.66.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.67. Foster acknowledges his debt to Mortimer J. Adler's *How to Read a Book*, 1940.

Most of us tend to do the third reading right away and often never do the first and second readings at all. We give a critical analysis of a book before we understand what it says.⁵⁵

b) Three extrinsic rules

The intrinsic rules of study, however, are in themselves inadequate. To read successfully we need the *extrinsic aids of experience, other books, and live discussion.*

(1) *Experience* is the only way we can interpret and relate to what we read. We read a book on tragedy with different eyes when we have walked through the valley of the shadow ourselves. *Experience that has been understood and reflected upon* informs and enlightens our study.

(2) Books often have meaning only when they are *read in relation to other writings*. People will find it exceedingly difficult to understand the New Testament books of Romans or Hebrews, for example, without a grounding in the literature of the Old Testament... The great writings that take up the central issues of life interact with one another. They cannot be read in isolation.

(3) *Live discussion* refers to the *ordinary interaction* that occurs among human beings as they pursue a particular course of study... when we gather for discussion, debate, and Socratic dialogue insights emerge that would never have come without this exchange. We interact with the author, we interact with each other, and new creative ideas are born.

[Pardon the interruption: Foster provides much food for thought on reading the Bible and the great books. Sadly, there is too much to summarize in this introduction. We will circle back in future, *D.V.*]

⁵⁵ *Celebration*, p.67.

4.2. *Study of Nonverbal "Books"*

We now come to the *least recognized* but perhaps the *most important field of study*: the *observation of reality in things, events, and actions*. The easiest place to begin is with nature. It is not difficult to see that the created order has many things to teach us.⁵⁶

a) **Nature**

We begin the *study of nature by paying attention*. We see flowers or birds. We observe them carefully and prayerfully... And so the first step in the study of nature is *reverent observation*. A leaf can speak of order and variety, complexity and symmetry.

Evelyn Underhill writes,

“Gather yourself up, as the exercises of recollection have taught you to do. Then . . . stretch out by a distinct act of loving will towards one of the myriad manifestations of life that surround you. ... As to the object of contemplation, it matters little. From Alp to insect, anything will do, provided that your attitude be right.”⁵⁷

The next step is to make friends with the flowers and the trees and the little creatures that creep upon the earth... Of this much we can be sure: *if we love the creation, we will learn from it*.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky counsels,

“Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Celebration*, p.73.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.73. The quote is from Evelyn Underhill *Practical Mysticism*, 1955, pp. 93-94. We met Underhill in the aide-mémoire “Christian Spirituality 201: The Essentials of Mysticism.”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.74. The quote is from *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1952, p. 167.

b) Relationships

There are, of course, many other “books” beside nature that we should study. If we will *observe the relationships* that go on between human beings, we will receive a graduate-level education.

Watch, for example, how much of our speech is aimed at *justifying our actions*. We find it almost impossible to act and allow the act to speak for itself. No, we must explain it, justify it, demonstrate the rightness of it. Why do we feel this compulsion to set the record straight? Because of pride and fear, because our reputations are at stake!...

We should become *attentive to the ordinary relationships* we encounter throughout the day: at home, work, school. We notice the things that control people. Remember, we are not trying to condemn or judge anyone; we are *only trying to learn*. If we do find a judging spirit emerging within ourselves, we observe that and learn.⁵⁹

c) Ourselves

As I mentioned earlier, one of the *principal objects of our study should be ourselves*. We should *learn the things that control us*. We observe our *inner feelings* and mood swings. What controls our moods? Why do we like certain people and dislike others? What do *these things teach us* about ourselves?*

In doing all this we are not trying to be amateur psychologists or sociologists. Nor are we obsessed with excessive introspection. We study these matters with *a spirit of humility*, needing a large dose of grace. We want only to follow the dictum of Socrates: “*Know thyself.*” And through the blessed Holy Spirit we are expecting Jesus to be our living and ever present Teacher.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Celebration*, p.74-5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.75.

d) Institutions and cultures

We would do well to *study institutions and cultures and the forces that shape them*. Also, we should *ponder the events of our time*, noting first, with a spirit of discernment, what things our culture lifts up as “great events.” Let's *look at the values of the culture* - not what people say they are, but what they actually are.

Let's *learn to ask questions*. What are the assets and liabilities of a technological society? What has the fast-food industry done to the tradition of a family gathering for dinner? Why do we find it difficult in our culture to have time to develop relationships? Is Western individualism beneficial or destructive? What in our culture is in harmony with the gospel and what is at odds with it? One of the most important functions of Christian prophets in our day is the ability to perceive the *consequences of various forces in our culture and to make value judgments upon them*.⁶¹

SUMMARY

So far, we have introduced the *first four practices of the Inward Practices*: Meditation, Prayer, Fasting and Study.

The next primer will focus on *the four Outward Practices*: Simplicity, Solitude, Submission and Service.

The third primer in this series will cover *the four Corporate Practices*: Confession, Worship, Guidance and Celebration.

Later on, the hope is to circle back and look at the spiritual practices in more depth, with more information on practicalities. As always, God willing and the creek don't rise :=) ⁶²

⁶¹ *Celebration*, p.75-6.

⁶² Compiled for the Anglican Parish of St. Mary's, Russell, by Gerrit Botha, February, 2020.