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12 Spiritual Disciplines of Abstinence

For the Practical Follower of Jesus Christ

by

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12 Spiritual Disciplines of Abstinence for the Practical Follower of Jesus Christ

What is a spiritual discipline?

A discipline can be defined as a training action producing a quality or condition. Spiritual disciplines are actions making us more like Jesus Christ. As they become life long habits, we become more like Jesus Christ.

Spiritual disciplines are tools for practical discipleship. In fact, the words disciple and discipline come from the same Latin word, *discipulus*.

Disciplines are tools we use to get to know God. They are tools we use to make God known to others. We use them to demonstrate love. We use them to demonstrate the quality of our character. And we use them to demonstrate obedience to God. To show how much we love Him.

Bill Hull says “true conversion means discipleship, and further, that discipleship means discipline. We can experience great freedom when life's appetites serve God's kingdom rather than dominate our own lives.” (Hull, 2006, p. 88).

What is the purpose of a spiritual discipline?

“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” I Timothy 4:7 NASB. Spiritual disciplines have been provided by God for the Holy Spirit to help us grow in godliness.

As we grow in godliness, we grow closer to God.

Godly people practice spiritual discipline. Spiritual disciplines are spiritual exercises. They need to be practiced to achieve godliness. Godliness makes us “like Jesus Christ” -- Christlikeness.

Since it's a never ending pursuit, the more we practice, the closer we get to Jesus and the closer we get to being like Jesus.

Why are they called disciplines of abstinence?

Disciplines of abstinence require us to give up something. They require restraint. Sometimes they're called disciplines of omission. To omit. To remove something from our lives.

Removing things creates time and energy for pursuing disciplines of engagement. Abstinence removes things that distract us. Without these distractions, we can relate to God in a deeper way.

What are the disciplines of abstinence?

See the pages that follow.

Read on!

Chastity

“Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time,
so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.

Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

1 Corinthians 7:5

CHASTITY can be defined as not having sexual relationships. Giving up sex. Choosing not to dwell upon or engage in the sexual dimension of our relationships to others – even our husbands or wives. (As pointed out in the passage above, 1 Corinthians 7:5)

Chastity is not just for Catholic priests and nuns. That's celibacy. Celibacy is when you chose chastity as a permanent lifestyle.

Chastity is when you chose to not engage in sexual behavior for a time. If you are not married, that time should be until you get married.

If you are married, you might chose chastity for a period of time. Chastity should be engaged in by mutual consent of both marriage partners. It should be for an agreed upon time. It should be for the expressed purpose of drawing closer to God.

However, it can have the opposite effect. People who chose not to engage in sexual activity often find that's all they can think about. A commitment to chastity will require the supernatural help of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God to be done correctly.

Fasting

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do,
for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.
I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.
Matthew 6:16

FASTING can be defined as going without food or water or something else. Giving up food or water. Choosing not to eat and, possibly, not to drink. A voluntarily abstaining from food or water for spiritual purposes.

Fasting is one of the most referenced disciplines of abstinence mentioned in the Bible. It's mentioned over 40 times in the Old Testament and over 20 times in the New Testament.

Some people believe spiritual awareness can be improved by removing food and drink from their lives for a period of time. Extreme examples in the Bible are Moses and Jesus existing for 40 days and nights without food or water. Other Biblical references suggest fasting for a few days or a week.

Fasting is also believed to have a positive impact on physical health, as well as spiritual health. Advice on healthy fasting can be gained from spiritual and medical sources.

Frugality

“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise,
making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.”
Ephesians 5:15, 16

FRUGALITY can be defined as using little food or money; doing things inexpensively. Giving up using money and resources for self-gain. Choosing not to use money or goods at our disposal in ways that merely gratify our desires or our hunger for status, glamor, or luxury.

Frugality is similar to poverty. Instead of giving up all your material wealth and possessions, you cut back on satisfying your own needs, wants, and desires. Often the objective is to make more resources available for giving and serving others.

Frugality can be accompanied by a simpler lifestyle. A simpler lifestyle leads to less stuff. Less stuff requires less storage, less maintenance, less clutter, less emotional baggage. Less can result in tangible financial savings which is the hallmark of frugality.

Frugality can be a stepping stone to both poverty and simplicity.

Martyrdom

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
Acts 7:59

MARTYRDOM is simply being put to death for a cause or belief. Giving up life. Choosing to die because of your witness for Jesus Christ rather than give up your faith or principles.

Among some early Christians, it was believed that true discipleship required martyrdom. The earliest books available to Christians included Pilgrims Progress by John Bunyon and Foxes' Book of Martyrs.

You might thinking this is an unrealistic spiritual discipline for today's modern disciple. But not so. Reading about early Christian martyrs encouraged the saints who came later to consider martyrdom as a viable option.

Some missionaries were known to pack their belongings in a coffin when they shipped overseas. They expected to die while on the mission field. The coffin served a dual purpose. It was a shipping crate on the way over and a final resting place for their mortal remains when they died on the field. Some African mission fields had a missionary life expectancy of less than a year.

In countries where practicing Christians are actively persecuted, martyrdom is still a viable alternative. They would rather die than denounce their belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Martyrdom is regularly practiced in the 21st century.

Poverty

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Luke 18:22

POVERTY can be defined as having little money, property and possessions. Giving up material goods and prosperity. Choosing not to own or possess things; giving away material goods.

The discipline of poverty can be practiced for a short time or a life time. To be a spiritual discipline, it must be practiced by choice. A large portion of the world's population lives in poverty, but not by choice.

Choosing poverty means I chose to give up my right to the ownership of material goods. Possessions that will make my life more comfortable. I forgo physical comfort. I give up the emotional comfort of relying on my money and possessions to support my life. I rely on God.

The discipline of poverty has been much debated in the Christian community over the years. There is not sufficient space to discuss the pros and cons of a lifestyle of poverty here.

Each of us must do as God leads. If God leads you to a life of poverty, good for you. If He does not, good for you. As with all spiritual disciplines, obedience is the key.

Sacrifice

Then a teacher of the law came to him and said,
"Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."
Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests,
but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."
Matthew 8:19-20

SACRIFICE can be defined as giving up something for a person or purpose. Giving up ownership. Choosing not to possess or enjoy what is necessary for our living. Giving up the security of meeting our needs with what is in our hands.

The original concept of a sacrifice was outlined in the Old Testament. Killing an animal, splashing blood on the alter and burning parts of the carcass were part of the sacrificial process. Killing an animal was a real loss to the owner in an agricultural society.

Wealth was measured by the number of animals you owned. Animals were capital. They could reproduce and provide you more animals. They could pull heavy loads. Today, most of us don't have animals to sacrifice. So we have to sacrifice something else of value. It has to be costly.

One person can give \$10,000 and it's not a big deal. Another person can give \$10,000 and it's a huge cost. It might be all they have. For one it's a sacrifice. For another it's not. One person can give away their car and it's a sacrifice. Another person can give away their car and it's no big deal.

One person's sacrifice is another person's "no big deal." Sacrifice is a personal issue between you and God.

Secrecy

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.
Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:6

SECRECY can be defined as keeping things from common knowledge or view. Giving up credit or praise. Choosing not to let our good deeds and qualities be known to others.

Secrecy allows you to do acts of love, kindness, sacrifice and service for others in the name of Jesus Christ without taking credit for it. You do things but nobody gets to know about it except God. Your reward is in heaven.

Try it sometime. I find it's easiest to give money to someone in secret. Give cash. Slide it under a door. Put it in a book. Stick it in a coat pocket. If you do it for a complete stranger, your chances of doing it in secret are better. Sometimes our friends can guess we were the ones who did it. I have never been discovered by a stranger. Even when I handed them the money in person and then walked away.

Secrecy can include any act, not just giving money. You can clean the snow off someone's car, rake their leaves, mow their yard. Of course, you have to do it when no one is watching you.

Anonymous notes of encouragement. Large tips for the waitress left on someone else's table. The opportunities to do good for others in secrecy are endless. Think about the surprises you have encountered in life. With a little bit of brainstorming, you can develop an impressive list of actions you can perform in secret.

Silence

But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him,
"I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."
Matthew 26:63

SILENCE can be defined as a condition of saying nothing or making no sound. Giving up sound. Choosing to remove sound (noise, music, or words) from our lives.

quiet = less noise than usual

silence = no sound

Voluntarily and temporarily giving up speaking so spiritual goals can be pursued.

If you have never tried to practice the discipline of silence, you will be amazed at how difficult it is. First, it's hard to find a silent place. I have been in the rocky mountains, miles from roads, houses, towns, and still I could hear planes overhead. You can find complete silence, but it's not easy.

The second difficulty is the shock that complete silence brings to your system. We are trained to have constant background noise. It might be the radio, the television, the sound of people working around us. Fast food restaurants have it. Grocery stores have it.

When you find complete silence, you will know it. And the first few times, you might find it terrifying. But silence is an acquired discipline and with enough practice you can enjoy it. In fact, you will be looking forward to the times you have set aside to practice silence. Whether they be extended planned times, or unplanned opportunities that arise that you can take advantage of.

Solitude

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

SOLITUDE can be defined as being by yourself, away from where things are going on. Giving up contact with people. Choosing to be alone. Choosing to not interact with other human beings. Removing yourself from companionship with other human beings. A state of mind and heart resulting in inner fulfillment, not a place

Many believe that solitude requires silence. Silence removes audible distractions. Solitude can remove visual distractions. It can remove emotional and physical distractions.

In Mark 1:35, it says that Jesus “went into a solitary place and prayed.”

Submission

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

1 Peter 5:5

SUBMISSION can be defined as giving away authority to another. Giving up control. Choosing to be helped by those with greater depth of experience and Christlikeness.

They know more than I do. I want to learn from them.

It's self-denial in order to learn from other disciples of Jesus Christ

Submission is a misunderstood discipline. When someone insists that you submit to them because they are the authority, then you can be pretty sure a misuse of submission is being used.

Submission is a voluntary choice made by a person to the authority of another. Godly men and women realize that others have gone before them. These folks have more experience and more wisdom in following Jesus Christ. They serve as worthy mentors and the future wise and godly Christian willingly submits to their teachings and suggestions.

NOTE: The spiritual discipline of submission is different than the command "children obey your parents." I believe the authority structure in the family is just as misunderstood as the spiritual discipline of submission, but for different reasons. Clarifying these misunderstanding is outside the scope of this report.

Voluntary Exile

“nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days.”

Galatians 1:17, 18

VOLUNTARY EXILE can be defined as choosing to live away from one's country and kin. Giving up being present in the community of others. A prolonged living away from your country, community, etc.

Sometimes people chose to move away from their friends and family so they can give extended, concentrated attention to developing their relationship with Jesus Christ. It could be for days, weeks, months or even years.

Centuries ago, exile was practiced for years or decades. Some people chose voluntary exile for the remainder of their lives so they could focus all their time and attention on worshiping God.

Today, several days to several months is more common. Often it doesn't exceed a year.

The Watch

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

Matthew 26:41

WATCH can be defined as looking out for danger during the night while others are sleeping. Giving up sleep. The act of keeping awake, especially of keeping awake and alert in order to look after, protect, or guard

Military personnel are familiar with the watch. A guard is posted during the night. While the troops sleep, some remain awake to “watch” for danger. To watch for enemy troops to attack. If they detect a surprise attack, they sound the alarm providing their comrades the opportunity to defend themselves.

This concept can be applied to our spiritual life. Some Christians chose to pray during their regular sleeping hours as a form of spiritual warfare. They are on the spiritual look out for Satan's attacks. They are careful to pray against the work of Satan when normally they might choose to sleep.

Praying in the garden at night before his death, Jesus asked his disciples to “watch and pray” with him. Most people were in bed sleeping. But Jesus and his disciples chose to give up sleeping and pray. They were “watching.”

Conclusion

A dozen spiritual disciplines are reviewed in this report. You can practice one or many of them at the same time. Some of them naturally go together.

If you are going to take the time and energy to practice solitude, you will probably want to include silence for at least part of the time. You may also decide to include fasting to heighten your sense of awareness of the presence of God.

Service and secrecy go well together. Sacrifice could be added to these.

Simplicity and frugality go together.

If you are not married, chastity is for you. If you think about food all the time, fasting is for you. If you think about money or making money, frugality can help.

If you are stressed out and overwhelmed, try solitude and silence for a while. It will do wonders for your attitude and perspective!

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