I cringe every time I hear someone say, “You need to live a disciplined life.” After nearly 40 years as a pastor and professor, I’ve observed how many different ways people define the phrase “the disciplined life,” and frankly, some of them are quite foreign to the essence of Christian faith and life. Almost every definition, even a good one, has to be approached with a wider view and set in a larger framework than the phrase alone contains. That’s what I want to provide for you in this chapter—a broader perspective that will invite and enable you to use the spiritual disciplines in ways that will make you a more effective disciple of Jesus. Living a disciplined life is essential, but
how you do that is as important as what you actually end up doing.¹

For some of us, the problem begins with the word “discipline.” We have associated it with the idea of punishment. We all have memories of parents and teachers having to “discipline” us because we had done something wrong. We can still hear their voices echoing in our minds, “OK, now you’ve done it. I’m going to have to discipline you.” So, what happens when we come to the phrase “the disciplined life” with those kinds of memories? You know the answer—we draw back. We hesitate. We’re not sure we want to go through another punitive process.

That’s why I prefer to use the term “means of grace” as a synonym for spiritual disciplines. We all recognize our need for grace. Few people really believe they are self-sufficient. From the first day we seriously considered whether or not to accept Christ, we have understood ourselves to be in need of grace. But sometimes, we need help in understanding how the grace of God flows into our lives, and how we pattern ourselves so we can receive that grace. In parts of the Christian tradition, the phrase “means of grace” has been used rather than “spiritual disciplines” precisely as a way to understand them as means (not ends) by which we open ourselves to the grace of God. As I’ve taught about the spiritual disciplines, I have met people for whom this simple shift of phrase makes all the difference in how they view and practice a disciplined life.

The term “discipline” can also be problematic because it is equated with the system a leader uses for producing it. Unfortunately, there are unhealthy lead-

¹Footnote: See reference or note.
ers who use the phrase “spiritual disciplines,” but what they really mean is “being spiritual like I am.”

They have a preconceived notion of what true devotion is, and it is almost always remarkably like the life they are living! It is a short step from defining your personal spirituality as “normative” to then creating a process that tries to make others like yourself, rather than guide them to be like Christ. I have known people who have been “de-formed” by pastors and teachers who had a “my way or the highway” view of the spiritual life. I have known unhealthy leaders who have built entire ministries (and the buildings that go with them) on little more than a self-centered view of “how things ought to be.”

Once again, the term “means of grace” can help us. It moves us away from a leader-centered process to a Christ-centered process. It is God’s grace that we need, not the alleged superiority of another’s experience. We worship and serve a God who creates, not one who clones. We can learn from the example of others, when those examples are genuine and healthy. But we are never to “become” what someone else is. Practicing the spiritual disciplines will not suffocate your God-given uniqueness; it will release it. As the contemporary chorus puts it, “This is the air I breathe. / Your holy presence, living in me.”

A third problem with the term “discipline” is that it can deteriorate into legalism. We can be taught or self-deceived into thinking that when we have adopted a cer-
tain list of spiritual disciplines, we are good Christians. We can use the list as a kind of litmus test that we always pass and then use to declare that we have “arrived.” Without our intending it (at least most of the time), we can experience the erosion of our Christian walk into the keeping of “rules and regulations” given by a God who is more interested in our obedience than our love—a God who is more a lawgiver than a loving Father, a God who is ready to pounce on offenders more than to pronounce forgiveness when we confess our sins.

There are so many things wrong with this view of “discipline,” I cannot write out everything associated with it. The serious theological problem is that it turns the Christian life into one of “works” rather than one of faith. Everything depends on us—on our being sure that we have developed the “correct” list and that we are keeping it perfectly. Over the years, I have lost count of the number of defeated saints who thought they had to get it right all the time; otherwise, God was “mad” at them. Whenever we practice the spiritual disciplines as a way to “prove” our spirituality, we have become entrapped in legalism, and we are in desperate need of liberty.

We could go on to list other misconceptions that surround the term “living a disciplined life,” but it is not the point of this chapter to describe the problems as much as it is to propose how we move beyond them to a proper use of spiritual disciplines (the means of grace) in our Christian walk. However, I hope that some of you who read this chapter will be comforted as you realize you may have been the recipient of bad
teaching and/or “deformative” experiences in relation to the spiritual disciplines. If so, I hope you will celebrate that at this very moment you are on the journey from legalism to liberty, and the spiritual disciplines are God-given practices to enable that to happen in your life. But as I said at the beginning of this chapter, we need a larger framework and wider view if this is to be so. The rest of the chapter will attempt to provide that. I will do it through a series of related words that enable us to understand and practice the spiritual disciplines in a healthy way.

**disciple**

The spiritual disciplines will never be what they are intended to be until we understand and deeply acknowledge that we are “disciples” of Jesus. This is our primary identity as Christians, and without it the spiritual disciplines will always appear as a “tack on” to whatever other views of ourselves we have. I have worked with many frustrated pastors who lament, “I can’t seem to get my people interested in the spiritual disciplines.” Often this is because many people operate more with a “member mentality” than a “disciple mentality.” As long as this is the case, the call to live a disciplined life will fall on deaf ears. As one member crassly told his pastor, “Why should I do that? I’m a member in good standing in this congregation. What more is there?”

But everything changes when we realize that the primary word to describe our Christian life is “disciple.” The word means learner. It means follower. It means someone else is in control, and our task is to
dispose our hearts and position our lives in ways that will enable us to see Jesus more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly—day by day. When this not only dawns upon us but also sinks deeply into us, it will make perfect sense to “practice the presence of God” through the use of spiritual disciplines.4

But something else happens when we adopt the word “disciple” as the primary identifier of our lives. We find that this view coincides with the deepest desire of our hearts. We are made in the image of God, and as Augustine5 said, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. To live the life of a disciple is to live the life we have always wanted to live.6 When we live as disciples, our hearts exclaim, “For this I was made!” And out of that exclamation will come a willingness to practice the spiritual disciplines in whatever ways will make us better followers of the Master. I have watched this happen for decades, as people experience the movement of a “disciplined life” from something they think is “outside” (i.e., imposed) to one that is “inside” (i.e., something invited). The difference is startling, and it all hinges on who we understand ourselves to be.

Closely related to this is the important realization that there is no “one size fits all” model for being a disciple. When you study the list of the first apostles (Mark 3:16-19), you see how different each of them was, and if you follow that with how tradition says they were used in the Early Church, the point is clear that God delights to use us as we are made in creation, not simply in re-creation.
Our personality traits and talents combine with our spiritual gifts to make us men and women who will be used by God in an amazing variety of ways. And when it comes to the spiritual disciplines, it means we will not all make use of the same ones, and we will even practice the same ones in different ways. The end result is a “disciple” who brings joy to God’s heart.

**discipline**

When we understand who we are, God’s beloved children, who live as faithful disciples, then we know how to begin adopting the means to become who we say we are. And that brings us to “discipline,” not as punishment, but as disposition. When we know we are disciples, we are at the place where we can bring the word “discipline” back into the picture, this time as God intends for it to be.

There are two primary images in this regard. First, Jesus says in John 15 that we are branches and He is the vine. And one of the key elements in that image is that branches have to be pruned so that they may bear more fruit. If we are not careful, we will misread the word “pruned” in the same way we sometimes misread the word “discipline.” So, let me write it out again: we are pruned *so that we may bear more fruit*. If we see ourselves as disciples, isn’t that exactly what we want—to “bear more fruit” for Jesus? Of course it is, and in that context we come to understand discipline as the disposing of our lives so that Christ can lead us where He wants us to go and do with us what He wants to do. This does not mean that every form of discipline will be neat, quick, clean, easy, and painless. There are
times when discipline is the toughest thing God asks us to do. The difference now is that it is set in an entirely different frame of reference: our desire to please God and our willingness to have God engage us to our maximum potential.

The second image is the mind of Christ in Phil. 2:5-11. Here, the idea of discipline is one of servanthood. Our use of the spiritual disciplines is our multifaceted way of asking God day after day, “How can I serve You?” I’m told that every morning the late Frank Laubach began his day with this prayer: “Lord, what are You doing in the world today that I can help You with?” That is the prayer of someone who understands he is a servant. Discipline, therefore, is not about doing what we don’t want to do—it is doing the thing we most want to do—serving Jesus in ways that glorify God.

Both these images connect us to the single idea of surrender. Rooted in Paul’s exhortation for Roman Christians to present themselves to God as living sacrifices (12:1), the concept winds its way through the history of Christian spirituality. Whatever else being a “living sacrifice” may mean, it surely means that, unlike dead sacrifices that could only be offered once, we can offer ourselves repeatedly to God. The practical act of daily submitting ourselves to God through the use of spiritual disciplines leads to the deeper surrender of our lives. One of the ways I like to say it is,
“God does not ask us to have a devotional time; God calls us to live a devotional life.” Of course, we will set aside specific times to engage in the practice of the disciplines, but our goal is a deeper attitude (what we are calling “discipline”)—one that prays, “Take my life, and let it be / Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.” Our lives are now in God’s hands; our hearts are now disposed to discern and do God’s will. Out of this fundamental shift in attitude (from selfishness to surrender), we view and practice the spiritual disciplines in a radically different way.

**disciplines**

Now we are at the place where we can use the word that appears in the title of this chapter. I hope you can see why I said at the beginning that we must have a broader perspective and a larger framework before we can understand where the spiritual disciplines fit into the scheme of things. And I repeat the point that I made earlier: if we try to skip over the concepts of “disciple” and “discipline,” we end up trying to require people to do things they are not properly motivated or disposed to do. But when these two ideas are deeply rooted in us, we are at the point where the use of spiritual disciplines will enable us to produce what others have called “the life of God in the human soul.”

We will most likely begin our use of spiritual disciplines within the particular faith tradition in which we find ourselves. That is as it should be, for every tradition teaches the disciplines differently—both in relation to what they are and how they are to be used. One of the first things we should do is to find out what “the
Christian spiritual life” means in our own denomina-
tional or parachurch history.\(^9\) But as we do this, it will
become apparent that our predecessors have drunk
from wells that preceded their own times and predat-
ed the creation of the church to which we belong. It is
impossible to study the Christian spiritual life and
stay encased in one tradition. Consequently, we will
discover that many streams have converged to pro-
duce both our particular tradition and the larger
Christian tradition in which we stand.\(^10\)

As we broaden our exposure to these other
sources, we will discover that each of the spiritual dis-
ciplines have been practiced by different people in
different ways. Take prayer, for example. We will find
that some have prayed mostly out loud, while others
have prayed in silence. We will find some who have
prayed with prayer books and others who have prayed
only extemporaneously. We will find some who have
emphasized praise, while others have focused on in-
tercession. We will find some preferring personal
prayer and others who pray mainly in groups.

And what does this do for us? For one thing, it
gives us a bigger picture of a specific spiritual disci-
pline than we could ever have if we defined or limited
it to what we know from our particular tradition. For
another thing, it shows that we have much room in
which to move in order to discover how to practice a
particular spiritual discipline for ourselves. But per-
haps most importantly, it ends forever the notion that
“we do it right” while others “do it wrong.” It elimi-
nates the narcissistic spirituality we referred to at the
beginning of the chapter. We come to see what God
has wanted us to see ever since the author of Hebrews wrote that “we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses” (12:1). And we find to our delight and benefit that making friends with various members of that “cloud” creates a stronger spirituality, and one that it is more nearly Christlike. It means that we will always have an element of the classical, historic, and lasting quality of the spiritual life as we practice the spiritual disciplines.

With all this before us, we are at the place where some indication of what the spiritual disciplines actually are will be helpful. I have deliberately shied away from giving you a list, lest you think any such list covers them all. In fact, even at this point in the chapter, I prefer you to begin the list with a view of their role: disciplines to strengthen us inwardly, disciplines to strengthen us outwardly, and disciplines to strengthen us corporately. With these basic categories in place, Foster provides some disciplines for each dimension as follows:

The Inward Disciplines
- Meditation
- Prayer
- Fasting
- Study

The Outward Disciplines
- Simplicity
- Solitude
- Submission
- Service

The Corporate Disciplines
- Confession
Worship
Guidance
Celebration

There are two very important things to keep in mind as you read this list—both of which Richard Foster shared with me personally years ago. First, this list (and any other one, for that matter) is not exhaustive. And second, no Christian will practice all 12 disciplines equally well all the time. The point is this: the spiritual disciplines are intended to be channels for the grace of God to enable us to live the lives we have to live at any particular moment. From this list alone, you can see how different spiritual disciplines could facilitate a particular kind of life experience. Because the Holy Spirit is working in and through all the disciplines, we can trust God to “activate” our use of any of them to make us more like Christ in whatever situations we find ourselves. Some of the disciplines will be rather permanent, and we will practice them almost daily. Others may come and go as the occasions for them appear and/or the need for them arises. The end result will be what Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, NKJV).

discipleship

I really like this last word. I often tell my students that “discipleship is two or more disciples in the same
boat.” Our practice of the spiritual disciplines has brought us to a grand place—the place where we can relate to and benefit from one another. The practice of the spiritual disciplines was never meant to foster a “Me and Jesus” lifestyle. Our use of the means of grace is designed to bring us into closer fellowship with other disciples—into what John Wesley referred to as Christian conference.

This idea goes all the way back into the earliest phases of Christianity. Most especially, Jesus himself could not live His life on earth without doing it in a community of apostles and friends. Pentecost happened when the believers were all together in one place (Acts 2:1). And nearer to the end of the New Testament era, the writer of Hebrews warned Christians not to neglect “the assembling of ourselves together” (10:25, NKJV). And Paul’s entire strategy was to establish communities of faith throughout the Roman Empire and tie them together with common stewardship and missional responsibilities.

A clear understanding of “discipleship”—that is, viewed as Christian community—is where a proper practice of spiritual disciplines will take us. I often say to my students, “Is the word ‘church’ singular or plural?” If they answer according to grammar, the answer is singular. But when we answer biblically and theologically, the answer is always plural. And it is the formation of a perspective that understands that this community is always larger than the particular part of the Body of Christ in which I happen to be a member.

I’ve discovered that one of the most practical benefits of this kind of vision is that it saves me from a
myopic view of the Christian life. I have to confess—it would be so much easier to create my own spiritual life and then settle comfortably into it. I would not have to deal with others or be influenced by them. I’m not the first to feel this way. Dorotheos of Gaza, a sixth-century leader of a monastic community, became concerned that fellow monks were grumbling too much about having to put up with each other and their irritating practices. Some of them thought they could love God “better” if they went back to living as hermits. Dorotheos told them flat out they were wrong. He asked them to visualize the world as a big circle with God at the center. He then asked them to see themselves somewhere on the circumference, along with the other members of the monastery—indeed, with everyone else in the world. “Imagine now,” he said, “that there are straight lines connecting every human life on the circumference to God at the center. Can’t you see that there is no way to move toward God without drawing closer to other people, and no way to approach other people without coming nearer to God?”

Our practice of the spiritual disciplines will make us holier, healthier, happier, and better connected to the rest of the Body of Christ. In fact, I personally believe that our use of the means of grace will create a desire to know as many different kinds of Christians as we can, precisely because
each person will magnify and clarify our understanding and experience of God. Our use of spiritual disciplines will generate a journey to find as many brothers and sisters in the family of God as we can. And one of our great joys will be to pass our years being marvelously blessed by a host of men and women we would not have met if we had limited our exposure to those “like us.”

Books are interesting things. They contain words, but they are most valuable when they enable us to “see” things. I hope you can “see” what I have been trying to write about in this chapter. Can you “see” how God views the spiritual disciplines and how God intends for you to practice them? Have you been able to see that “discipline,” far from being punitive, is actually an expression of the very kind of life we want to live if we see ourselves as disciples of Jesus? Will you now be able to use the spiritual disciplines to make the journey from legalism to liberty? If you can honestly answer yes to these questions, I will have written this chapter the way I set out to write it. Over the years, I have heard Richard Foster say repeatedly, “The spiritual disciplines enable us to do what needs to be done, when it needs to be done.” There is nothing more liberating than that.

notes

1. This chapter is only an introduction to a much bigger subject, so one of the things I will do is to provide you with notes to take you beyond my own thoughts. In terms of the “how” of spiritual disciplines (not merely the “what”), I would encourage you to read Dallas Willard’s The Spirit of the Disciplines (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).


4. Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978—with subsequent revisions) is written from this point of view. They can only exist in the lives of “deep people”—people who are disciples, not dabblers, in the spiritual journey.

5. The great theologian, bishop, and church father (d. A.D. 430).


9. For example, I am a United Methodist, and so I want to stand in the best spiritual-formation tradition I can as a Wesleyan Christian. I have tried to help Christians in my tradition do this through my books *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition: A Workbook* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1995) and *Prayer and Devotional Life for United Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999). Books like this are available for many of the traditions within Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches.

10. Richard Foster has given us a great gift in his book *Streams of Living Water* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), as he shows us how we can celebrate and benefit from the great traditions of the Christian faith.

11. Use Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*, previous-
ly cited, to continue to develop the disciplines along these lines. I have not found any better way to organize them than this. Also, Dallas Willard in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* organizes the disciplines according to those that help us be more “reflective” and those that enable us to be more “active.” I particularly like this approach because it helps us see that the disciplines contribute to the creation of the kind of life God wants us to live—that holy blend of contemplation and action.


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The spiritual disciplines are regular practices that benefit our lives and produce fruit. Much like the discipline of daily exercise or reading will produce benefits in our lives. The Bible doesn’t have a “spiritual disciplines list” we should practice, but it does give us commands to do certain things on a regular basis. And when we do, they produce fruit in our lives. Here are a few “Spiritual Disciplines” or practices that will always produce fruit and blessings in our lives. But before you read these and feel overwhelmed, what are spiritual disciplines? The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people. Richard J. Foster. Spiritual disciplines are habits, practices, and experiences that are designed to develop, grow, and strengthen certain qualities of spirit to build the “muscles” of one’s character and expand the breadth of one’s inner life. They structure the “workouts” which train the soul. What are the spiritual disciplines? When Christians speak of spiritual disciplines, they usually mean regular practices that benefit our lives and produce fruit. Much like the discipline of daily exercise or reading will produce benefits in our lives. The Bible has no comprehensive “spiritual disciplines list” we should practice, but it does give us commands to do certain things on a regular basis. And when we do, they produce fruit in our lives. Are you looking for a list of spiritual disciplines from around the world? In this article, you’ll find over 60 practices, traditions, ceremonies, and rituals. Humans crave spiritual experience, and true spirituality is embedded in practice. Over millennia, this led to the development of dozens of spiritual disciplines and practices. The purpose of this article is to give you a glimpse of each without going into too much detail. After reading it, you’ll know what’s “out there,” and investigate further if you wish to do so.