

REVISED  
AND  
UPDATED

SPIRITUAL  
DISCIPLINES  
FOR THE  
CHRISTIAN  
LIFE

DONALD S. WHITNEY

FOREWORD BY J. I. PACKER

STUDY GUIDE

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## LESSON 1

# THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

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*Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.*

(1 TIMOTHY 4:7, NASB)

### CENTRAL IDEA

The only road to Christian maturity passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. These personal and interpersonal activities given by God in the Bible have been practiced by God's people since biblical times. They are the sufficient means Christians are to use in the Spirit-filled pursuit of godliness, that is, closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ. Jesus modeled them for us and expects us to pursue them. In doing so, we will taste the joy of a spiritually disciplined lifestyle.

### WARM-UP

1. Describe a time when you disciplined yourself in order to reach a specific goal or when you did not discipline yourself and failed to reach a specific goal.

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### *What Is the Purpose of Spiritual Disciplines?*

When it comes to discipline in the Christian life, many believers feel it's discipline without direction. Prayer threatens to be drudgery. The practical value of meditation on Scripture seems uncertain. The real purpose of a discipline like fasting is often unclear.

The Bible says of God's elect, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). God's eternal plan ensures that every Christian will ultimately conform to Christlikeness. We will be changed "when he appears" so that "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). This is no vision; this is you, Christian, as soon as "he appears."

So why all the talk about discipline? If God has predestined our conformity to Christlikeness, where does discipline fit in? Although God will grant Christlikeness to us when Jesus returns, until then He intends for us to grow toward it. We aren't merely to wait for holiness; we're to pursue it. "Strive for peace with everyone," we're commanded in Hebrews 12:14, "and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

This leads us to ask what every Christian should ask: "How then shall I pursue holiness? How can I be like Jesus Christ, the Son of God?" We find a clear answer in 1 Timothy 4:7: "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (NASB).

The only road to Christian maturity and godliness (a biblical term synonymous with Christlikeness and holiness) passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. Godliness is the goal of the Disciplines, and when we remember this, the Spiritual Disciplines can become a delight instead of drudgery.

### *God Commands Us to Be Holy*

The original language of the words "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" makes it plain that this is a command of God, not merely a suggestion. Holiness is not an option for those who claim to be children of the Holy One (see 1 Peter 1:15-16), so neither are the means of holiness—that is, the Spiritual Disciplines—an option.

The expectation of disciplined spirituality is implied in Jesus' offer of Matthew 11:29: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." The same is true in this offer of discipleship: "And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me'" (Luke 9:23). These verses tell us that to be a disciple of Jesus means, at the very least, to learn from and follow Him. Learning and following involve discipline, for those who learn only incidentally and follow accidentally are not true disciples. That discipline is at the heart of discipleship is confirmed by Galatians 5:22-23, which says that spiritual self-discipline (implied in "self-control") is one of the most evident marks of being Spirit-controlled.

The Lord Jesus not only expects these biblical Spiritual Disciplines of those who follow Him, He is the model of discipline for the purpose of godliness.

### *What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?*

First, the Bible prescribes *both personal and interpersonal* Spiritual Disciplines. Some Spiritual Disciplines—like private prayer—we practice alone; others—like small group or congregational prayer—we practice with other Christians. Second, Spiritual Disciplines are *activities, not attitudes*. Disciplines are practices, not character qualities, graces, or "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23). Third, the subject matter of this book is limited to those Spiritual Disciplines that are *biblical*, that is, to practices taught or modeled in the Bible. Fourth, this book takes the position that the Spiritual Disciplines found in Scripture are *sufficient* for knowing and experiencing God, and for growing in Christlikeness. Fifth, the Spiritual Disciplines are practices *derived from the gospel, not divorced from the gospel*. When the Disciplines are rightly practiced, they take us deeper into the gospel of Jesus and its glories, not away from it as though we've moved on to more advanced levels of Christianity. Sixth, the Spiritual Disciplines are *means* to godliness, *not ends* to be practiced for their own sake.

### *The Importance of Holiness (Godliness)*

4. What does 1 Peter 1:15-16 say about the importance of holiness in believers' lives?

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5. Describe a godly person you know who has reached spiritual maturity through discipline. Which practical Spiritual Disciplines has he or she practiced regularly?

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### *Catalysts That God Uses to Make Us More Christlike*

6. *People.* Often God brings people into our lives whose input leads us to become more Christlike. Read Proverbs 27:17. Describe a time when God used someone to file away your rough, ungodly edges.

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7. a. *Circumstances.* We've all faced trying circumstances that God uses to make us more like Himself. What does Romans 8:28 say about our difficult circumstances?

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- b. As a group, discuss how God uses circumstances in life to move you closer toward godliness.

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8. *Spiritual Disciplines*. Rather than externally coming from people and/or circumstances, this catalyst works from the inside of our lives and goes outward. Also, God grants us more choice regarding our involvement with this catalyst than with people or circumstances. Describe a time when God used your prayer time or Bible meditation to change you from the inside out.

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### *Spiritual Disciplines: A Way to Seek God and Know Him Better*

Today people place great emphasis on physical exercise as a means of staying healthy. Spiritual Disciplines are similar to physical exercise, in that when we exercise ourselves spiritually we promote spiritual health and growth—godliness—in our lives.

Let's look at two Bible stories that reveal how two people put themselves in the path of Jesus and sought Him. As a result, their lives were forever changed.

9. Bartimaeus: Luke 18:35-43  
 a. What strikes you about his response to Jesus?

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