

## *Spiritual Disciplines*

Ephesians 4:11-13

In 1729, John Wesley found himself in a conflict between core values and cultural norms. When he came to Oxford, he found that his brother, Charles, had started a new faith community. John joined Charles and two other believers, and the foursome committed themselves to meeting on a regular basis to pray, to read the classic texts of the early church fathers, and to hold one another accountable for their actions. They also took Holy Communion once a week.

About six months later, the four friends were asked to speak to a man who was in prison for killing his wife. It was requested that they minister to the man before his execution. Later, they collected money to free people from debtors' prison. Soon they were the scandal of Oxford. They were called various names, including the "Holy Club," "Bible Moths," and "Methodists."

Three of these participants were to transform the nature of Christianity in England: John Wesley became the leader of the Methodist Societies; Charles Wesley wrote indigenous Christian music that changed the face of congregational worship; and George Whitefield became known as one of the greatest evangelists of his era.

In his journals, Whitefield talks about his experience of being part of the Holy Club:

Whether I ate or drank, or whatsoever I did, I endeavored to do all to the Glory of God. Like them...I received [the sacrament] every Sunday at Christ Church. I joined with them in keeping the stations by fasting Wednesdays and Fridays and left no means unused, which I thought would lead me nearer to Jesus Christ.... I was from time to time engaged to visit the sick and the prisoners, and read to poor people, till I made it a custom, as most of us did, to spend an hour every day in doing acts of charity.

Members of the Holy Club were deeply focused on their core values. Rather than living by the current cultural norms of the Anglican Church and British society, they examined the spiritual leaders and writers of the past. By immersing themselves in the Bible and in the writings of the early Christians, they discovered a new way of understanding the Christian life. Rather than the formal rigidity of the Anglican Church, the Holy Club came to understand the Christian life as relational. The mission of the Holy Club could be summed up in the phrase "love God and neighbor."

The core values and missions of the Holy Club led its members to a vision that moved them beyond simply taking care of their own needs to meeting the needs of those around them, even the most destitute and despised people in their society. But rather than being well received by those in the church and be fellow students and professors at Oxford, Wesley and his friends were mocked and laughed at; they also faced stiff opposition from many different factions. In spite of this opposition, these early Methodists held fast to their spiritual disciplines and, in time, changed the face of a nation.

Spiritual disciplines were a vital facet of this process of discovery and experimentation because the practice of spiritual disciplines forms and sustains the core values. John Wesley called the spiritual disciplines “means of grace.” Through the practice of acts of justice and compassion, the public worship of God, the ministry of the Word, the Lord’s Supper, family and private prayer, searching the Scriptures, fasting or abstinence, and Christian conferencing, the early Methodists developed a lived theology that moved them deeper into their love and understanding of God. As they practiced the means of grace, Wesley and his friends began to see the world through different lenses. (Craig Kennet Miller, *Next Church.Now*, pp 59-61)

This morning I would like to talk about three of the spiritual disciplines: public worship of God, family and private prayer, and searching the Scriptures. This is not meant in any way to raise the level of importance of these three or diminish the value of the others. As with anything, we need to have balance and should be striving to fulfill each facet of the “means of grace.” However, when I look at them individually, I can see some that serve as the foundation onto which others can be built. To me, attending church, praying, and reading the Bible are the foundations that all Christians are to build from. Without these charity, ministering to others, Communion, fasting or abstaining, and gathering with other Christians aren’t nearly as effective or edifying as they can and should be.

### **Public Worship of God**

There is no doubt that Christianity is formed around an individual’s relationship with Jesus Christ. If that is the case, then why is public worship such a big deal? Why can’t we watch services on the TV or the Internet from the comfort of our home? I mean we can run to the refrigerator or bathroom as needed, save gas because we don’t have to drive across town, buy less clothes because we don’t have to come to a costume party, etc.

However, some Christians have no choice but to worship from their home. They are trapped in a hospital bed or working in an isolated area where no church exists. And God is certainly sufficient to care for their needs. You can still get to heaven if you can’t go to church. But even though it’s technically possible to live the Christian life in isolation, it’s certainly not the norm.

When you become a Christian, you are called into a relationship with God (1 Corinthians 1:9). But 1 John 1:3 tells us, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” This makes it clear that we enter a fellowship that goes two ways: with God and with other Christians.

The New Testament never divides Christians into the church members and the non-church members. All the way through, it assumes that everybody participates in their local assembly. It gives no samples of Christians who belong to the “universal church” but have no link with a local church. One scholar has said that “any idea...of enjoying salvation or being a Christian in isolation is foreign to the New Testament writings.” (Alan Stibbs, *God's Church*, p. 92) Wherever Christians are within range of each other in the New Testament, they meet. Every time the Apostle Paul comes to a town in the book of Acts where there are no Christians, he wins a few converts and immediately organizes them into a small group – a little church.

Acts 20:7 reveals the practice of the early church, “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.” For Christians in every location, regular gathering was a part of life.

Here are three reasons why we are to participate in the public worship of God. First is the use of spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 12 makes it clear that God has given spiritual gifts to every Christian. And verse 7 states unmistakably that these abilities are not provided to make you feel good; they are abilities to minister that should be used for the common good! 1 Peter 4:10 commands us to use spiritual gifts to help each other. The same passage makes it clear that we meet with other Christians so they can use their gifts to strengthen us. God's gift of a preacher or teacher is wasted if no one comes to hear them speak.

The second is mutual ministry. The church is pictured as a body in 1 Corinthians 12, and Paul explains that each part of the body exists to meet the needs of other body parts. In the same way, God intends each of us to meet the needs of other believers, using our strengths to help in their areas of weakness. 1 Corinthians 12:21 expresses it this way, “The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don't need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!” Neither can a Christian claim to be self-sufficient today.

The New Testament is full of “one another” commands. We are to comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18), build up one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11), confess our sins to one another (James 5:16), pray for one another (James 5:16), and many more. How can we obey these directives if we stay away from the gathering of believers?

The third is accountability. God designed the church as a place where spiritual leaders could watch out for our welfare, as a shepherd guards the sheep (1 Peter 5:1-4; Hebrews 13:17). A Christian who answers only to himself can easily rationalize sinful attitudes or actions; regular contact with other Christians can keep us sharp. A single verse should actually be sufficient answer for this question. Hebrews 10:25 warns its readers, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

### **Family and Private Prayer**

Surveys show that more than 90% of America prays daily. No doubt they pray for health, wealth, happiness, etc. They also pray when grandma gets sick, and when grandma doesn't get better (or dies), many end up disillusioned, and some end up bitter. This is because they don't understand what the Bible says about prayer. It teaches that sin will stop God even hearing our prayers (Psalm 66:18). It teaches, among other things, that if we pray with doubt, we will not get an answer (James 1:6-7).

Here are four things that you can do to ensure that you are heard. First, pray with faith. Hebrews 11:6 tells us, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Someone once said to Ray Comfort of Living Waters Publications, “Ray, you're a man of great faith in God,” thinking that they were paying him a compliment. They weren't. He replied, “If I said to you, “I'm a man of great faith in my doctor? It's to the doctor. If I have great faith in him, it means that I see him as being a man of integrity, a man of great ability – that he is trustworthy. I give “glory” to the man through my faith in him.” The Bible says that Abraham “did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” (Romans 4:20-21) Abraham was a man of great faith in God. Remember, that is not a compliment to Abraham. He merely caught a glimpse of God's incredible ability, His impeccable integrity, and His wonderful faithfulness to keep every promise He makes. His faith gave “glory” to a faithful God.

So, when you pray, don't say, “Oh God, I hope you will supply my needs.” Instead say something like, “Father, thank you that you keep every promise You make. Your Word says that you will supply all my needs according to Your riches in glory, by Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19). Therefore, I thank you that you will do this thing for my family. I ask this in the wonderful name of Jesus. Amen”

Second, pray with clean hands and a pure heart. In the Book of Psalms 24:3-4 we read, “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.

How do you get “clean hands and a pure heart?” Simply by confessing your sins to God, through Jesus Christ. His blood cleanses from all sin (1 John 1:7-9). When you confess them to God through Jesus, God will not only forgive your every sin, He promises to forget that sin (Hebrew 8:12). He will even justify you, on the grounds of the sacrifice of the Savior. That means He will count it as though you have never sinned in the first place. He will make you pure in His sight – sinless. He will even “purge” your conscience, so that you will no longer have that sense of guilt that you sinned in the first place. That's what it means “to be justified by faith.” That's why you need to immerse yourself in Holy Scripture – to read the letters to the churches and see the wonderful things that God has done for us through the Cross of Calvary. If you don't bother to read the will, you won't have any idea of what has been left for you.

Next, pray genuine heart-felt prayers, rather than vain repetitions. We find in the Gospel of Matthew 6:7 Jesus teaching us, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.” Simply keep yourself in the love of God as you pray. If the love of God is in you, you will never pray hypocritical or selfish prayers. In fact, you won't have to pray selfish prayers, if you have a heart of love. When your prayer-life is pleasing to God, the Bible says that He will reward you openly (Matthew 6:6).

Finally, make sure that you are praying to the God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The second and third commandments tell us, “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand {generations} of those who love me and

keep my commandments.” (Exodus 20:3-6). What is the best way to know that you are praying to the God revealed in Holy Scripture? Study the Word. Don't accept the image of God portrayed by the world, even though it appeals to the natural mind. A loving, kind fatherly-figure, with no sense of justice or truth appeals to guilty sinners. Look to the thunderings and lightnings of Mount Sinai. Gaze at Jesus on the cross of Calvary – hanging in unspeakable agony because of the Justice of a holy God. Such thoughts tend to banish idolatry.

### **Searching the Scriptures**

Why should we search the Scriptures? Simply stated, we should read and study the Bible because it is God's word to us. 2 Timothy 3:16 states that the Bible is “God-breathed.” In other words, it is God's Word to us. There are so many questions that philosophers and people have asked that God answers for us in Scripture: What is the purpose to life? Where did I come from? Is there life after death? In addition to these “big” questions, it gives a ton of practical advice in areas such as: What do I look for in a mate? How can I have a successful marriage? How can I be a good friend?

We should read and study the Bible because it is totally reliable, without error. The Bible is unique among so-called “holy” books in that it does not merely give moral teaching and say, “trust me.” Rather, it gives us the ability to test it by checking the hundreds of detailed prophecies that it makes, by checking the historical accounts it records, and by checking the scientific facts it relates. Those who say the Bible has errors have their ears closed to the truth. Jesus once asked which is easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven you,” or “Rise, take up your bed and walk.” Then He proved He had the ability to forgive sins (something we cannot see with our eyes) by healing the paralytic (something those around Him could test with their eyes). Similarly, we are given assurance that God's Word is true when it discusses spiritual areas that we cannot test with our senses, by showing itself true in those areas that we can test.

The Bible will equip us for serving God (2 Timothy 3:17; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). It will help us know how to be saved from our sin and its ultimate consequence (2 Timothy 3:15). Meditating on it and obeying its teachings will bring success in life (Joshua 1:8; James 1:25). God's Word will help us see sin in our life and help us get rid of it (Psalm 119:9,11). It will give us guidance in life, making us wiser than our teachers (Psalm 32:8; 119:99; Proverbs 1:6). The Bible will keep us from wasting years of our life on that which will not last and does not matter (Matthew 7:24-27).

John Wesley in his *Preface to Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament* teaches how we should read the scripture. First, we should set aside a little time, every morning and evening. Second, when we read we should read a chapter from both the Old and New Testament. If we can't then at a minimum we should read a single chapter or at least a part of one. Next is to read with an eye so as to know God's will for us. Fourth, we are to continue to examine the scripture remembering some basic fundamentals –Original Sin, Justification by Faith, the New Birth, Inward and Outward Holiness. Fifth, serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used so that we can understand the Scripture as the Spirit intended. Finally, we must pause to examine ourselves as we read so that we can look in our heart and our lives.

**Call to Action**

If this was a test, how well would we grade in attending church, praying, and reading the Bible? If it was a job interview and we had to answer questions on these topics, would we get the job? In some aspects, isn't this much more important than school or work? The way in that we approach these topics is a foreshadowing of how we will respond in our daily living. When we're tested, tempted, or troubled will we have the fellowship of believers to support us? Will we have the Holy Spirit to talk to and guide us? Will we have Scripture to provide us a road map?

As I think about what has happened to this church since Jongsoo and I left in June 2001, I am saddened. What was once a vibrant church with many dedicated Christians serving Jesus became a battleground with Satan. The saddest part though is that we lost the battle. As I was praying about what to say today, an analogy came to me. I look at this church as a patient from the field of battle that was critically wounded. Pastor Han came in and spent the first year trying to stabilize the patient. There was still blood loss (we lost some important members) and the wounds were deep, but we stabilized. The second year is a year of reassessing the patient and deciding what needs to be done to make them whole again. I believe the third year will be a year of rehabilitation. One in which we will be back on our feet and returning to the life that we had lived before the battle.

Each of us here is a critical member in making this a reality. We all have education, training, and experience to contribute to the cause. But do we have the "means of grace" to contribute? If we do not worship together – both large (services) and small (studies), if we do not pray, if we do not search the Scriptures, we will not be successful. I urge you to do so. I urge you to contribute all that God has inspired you to give to this endeavor. We will grow in Spirit. We will grow in number. We will grow as Christians. We will grow as a body of Christ. The spiritual disciplines are the tools that we need to grow.