



Introduction to Spiritual Disciplines

Throughout the centuries, committed Christians who have been interested in becoming more Christlike and in deepening their relationship with God have turned to spiritual disciplines for guidance and encouragement. But what are spiritual disciplines? And of what relevance are they for twenty-first-century Christians?

What Are Spiritual Disciplines?

Spiritual disciplines are regular practices and actions that are intended to facilitate spiritual growth and ultimately bring about transformation. The word *discipline* refers to a method or system of rules that develops self-control, character, orderliness, and/or efficiency. What makes spiritual disciplines *spiritual* is that our methods (1) are focused on God and patterns for faithful Christian living, (2) have biblical roots, and (3) have been interpreted, refined, and practiced by Christians throughout the ages.

Humble Beginnings

Between 250 and 400 CE, a number of Christian men and women left their towns, villages, and families and headed for the nearby desert, primarily in Egypt and Palestine. These were the hermits and premonastics who have come to be known as the desert fathers and mothers, or abbas and ammas.

As Christianity became a state religion following the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity in 313 CE, what it meant to be a Christian began to change. Without persecution, a Christian didn't need martyrdom to prove his or her commitment to Jesus Christ. The church was no longer an underground enterprise, so more concrete structures and rules could

be put in place. Theology, the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God, what sacraments should be recognized and how they were to be practiced, which texts would become the official canon of the Bible, when holy days were to be celebrated, and whether women could be leaders all became major political and religious controversies. It was a dangerous, confusing time.



The desert fathers and mothers were innovative, dedicated Christians who sought to escape these controversies in favor of wrestling with their own demons, determining how to be like Christ and discovering how to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17) in solitude in a harsh landscape.

From their experiment, we have the beginnings of monasticism, early understandings of Christian mystical experience, and those delightful, enigmatic tales and parables known as the Sayings. The desert fathers and mothers also created a framework for what we call spirituality—an integrated, lived experience of God rather than intellectual knowledge of God. Spiritual disciplines emerged as a practical, commonsense approach to living faithfully to God's claim on their lives.

The Virtuous Life

As the abbas and ammas worked and prayed in the desert, they set their sights on discovering what it is that keeps us from God. They identified eight sins that are at the core of our humanness and that separate us from God: gluttony, anger, lust for bodies, restless boredom, greed, love of praise, depression, and pride. The desert

HOW SHOULD WE PRAY?

Abba Macarius was asked, “How should one pray?” The old man said, “There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, ‘Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.’ And if the conflict grows fierce say, ‘Lord, help!’ God knows very well what we need and God shows us God's mercy.”

A SAYING

Abba Pambo questioned Abba Anthony saying: "What ought I to do?" And the elder replied: "Have no confidence in your own virtuousness. Do not worry about a thing once it has been done. Control your tongue and your belly."

fathers and mothers did not have the advantage of modern science to know what we know today—that depression and "restless boredom," which we would call AD-HD, have a biological basis and as such are no longer considered sins. It is also interesting to note that their concern for these eight sins precedes the church's naming of the Seven Deadly Sins by more than two hundred years.

They then identified virtues to help us overcome these sins and draw closer to God. Today, we would likely substitute the word *disposition* for *virtue*, as virtue and virtuous carry moralistic and pietistic overtones and an implied self-righteousness. Nevertheless, the desert fathers and mothers designated a variety of virtues as attitudes and mindsets toward life, preferred patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Chief among the virtues they extolled and cultivated were humility, the ability to discern God's will, nonjudging, forgiveness, hospitality, compassion, charity, suffering, and love.

Practice Makes Perfect

Virtues are broad concepts and mindsets, very much open to interpretation and misuse. The genius of the desert fathers and mothers was in making the abstract practical, concrete, and realistic by developing corresponding spiritual disciplines—actions and practices to acknowledge, encourage, and live into the virtues on a day-to-day basis. They believed that by clothing themselves with virtues and practicing the disciplines, they would grow in spirit, faith, hope, and love and by grace, perhaps be granted the gift of unity with God.

Recognition and practice of spiritual disciplines caught on outside the communities of abbas and ammas. The monastic tradition found value in the disciplines, as have theologians, reformers, and modern-day communities of faith. Why?

First and foremost, they work. Persons and communities of faith are able to draw closer to God when they tend to spiritual disciplines on a regular basis. In our busy

twenty-first-century lives, these disciplines prove life-giving—the perfect antidote to stress and a corrective to all the competing secular priorities that steal us away from God, family, community, our best selves, and the greater good of the world.

We also continue to make use of spiritual disciplines some seventeen hundred years since they were first being practiced because of the following:

- They lend themselves to different cultural settings and changing times.
- They invite theological reflection on the ordinary and help us make meaning of our everyday lives. Such reflection then moves us into action, such as worship and service.

ON HUMILITY

Amma Syncretica said, "Choose the meekness of Moses and you will find your heart which is a rock changed into a spring of water."

- They are communal versus individualistic. Though many can be practiced alone, spiritual disciplines are always done on behalf of the community as well as the individual.
- They are accessible to persons who do not think of themselves as theologians. Spiritual disciplines are practices of the people, not just pastors and other religious professionals.

Classic Spiritual Disciplines

If we look to Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches at different points in time, we see that these faith traditions celebrate a variety of spiritual disciplines that trace their roots to the desert. Some practices are different and some are shared. Today, we continue to draw strength from the spiritual disciplines that are common to our faith traditions and have withstood the test of time. These are the classic disciplines.

Prayer. Prayer is communication with God, and just like human relationships, good communication is central to a good relationship with God. In prayers of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, and supplication (intercession and petition), we're doing the talking and

God is listening. With meditation and contemplative prayer forms, such as *lectio divina*, centering prayer, the Jesus prayer, breath prayer, guided imagery, and the prayer of examen, we stop talking and listen to God. Meaningful back-and-forth dialogue deepens and strengthens our respect, trust, and gratitude.

Worship. Sermons, hymn singing, prayers, testimonials, reciting a creed, confession, and Scripture reading are all forms of worship. Though the elements, forms, and styles of worship vary by denomination and congregation, worship of God is both a pathway to Christian spirituality and an expression of it.

Sacraments. In the Protestant church, we recognize two sacraments, or distinctly Christian rites that convey Christ's grace and presence: baptism and Communion. The early church grappled with the number of sacraments and how they were to be practiced. By the Middle Ages, seven were recognized: baptism, confirmation, Communion, penance (confession and forgiveness), extreme unction ("last rites"), ordination, and marriage. (These seven are still recognized by the Roman Catholic Church.) Protestant reformers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries argued for two sacraments—the two rituals that were instituted by Jesus, according to Scripture. Celebrating these rituals reminds us of whose we are and immerses us in the mystery of our faith.

Sabbath. We all need time set apart for rest and worship. Not only did God set the example by resting after creating the world (Gen. 2:2–3), the Ten Commandments call us to Sabbath: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God" (Exod. 20:8–10). We can expand the concept of Sabbath beyond one day set aside for God each week to include retreat, several days away from work for more in-depth time alone with God, and sabbatical, an extensive, recurring period of rest.

Study. As the people of God, we need to read and study the Bible as sacred text so the stories and truths of our faith are embedded in our hearts and minds and inform the way we live. Scripture has always been formational in the Judeo-Christian tradition, with Protestant reformers in particular positioning Scripture as the focal point of Christian faith. Through study and discussion, Scripture comes alive and serves as the linchpin of spiritual formation.

OTHER SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

In addition to the classic spiritual disciplines, theologians, pastors, mystics, and religious scholars have studied, recommended, practiced, and written about a variety of other spiritual disciplines that can lead us closer to God, including the following:

- Discernment and submission to the will of God
- Celebration
- Foot washing
- Love feasts
- Singing and making music
- Physical exercise
- Pilgrimage
- Giving testimony
- Forgiveness
- Healing

Simplicity. How much "stuff" do we really need? Simplicity as a spiritual discipline calls us to detach from material things, to not accumulate unnecessary possessions, and to divest ourselves of anything we have and don't need. The less we have to tend to, the simpler our lives are and the more time and space we create for God.

Fasting. Historically, Christians have fasted as personal sacrifice to understand Christ's suffering and/or to align themselves with those who are hungry. Today, we may decide to fast from food, but the practice of simplicity also calls us to fast from anything that vies for the attention we should be giving to God, such as cell phones, television, or the Internet.

Service. As persons of deep, abiding faith, we naturally respond to the call to serve the world. This service may take the form of hospitality, feeding and clothing the homeless, donating money to find a cure for cancer, serving on a church committee, helping victims of natural disasters, or tutoring in a literacy program. There are countless ways to help heal the world. The problem is we can't do it all, and if we try, we could burn out. If

ON PRAYER

Abba Anthony said, "The prayer of the monk is not perfect until he no longer realizes himself or the fact that he is praying."

we're nurturing our souls and observing Sabbath, we are more likely to be energized to serve with enthusiasm and know when to take a step back to refresh, recharge, and renew before continuing to serve.

Guidance. Since leading a spiritual life is seldom easy, it helps to have a companion along the way to listen, offer guidance, and hold us accountable. The desert fathers and mothers served as the first spiritual directors. As they earned a reputation for wisdom, townspeople would travel to the desert to ask their counsel and advice. They responded with a Saying. Today, spiritual direction generally takes two forms: one-on-one direction and group, or peer, direction. In one-on-one spiritual direction, a trained "director" listens and helps the "directee" recognize and respond to God's presence in his or her life. In group direction, several people come together with or without a trained director to discern and respond to God's presence in their lives, pray together, and perhaps study Scripture. Covenant and koinonia groups that also hold members accountable to agreed-upon practices are examples of peer, or group, spiritual direction.

Rule of Life

So how do we really practice spiritual disciplines? And which ones?

It used to be that Roman Catholic religious orders were the only groups that had a *rule*, that is, a document outlining the community of faith's common life and the spiritual disciplines to be practiced by its members, along with the purpose and mission of the community. The Rule of Benedict is probably the best-known rule.

Rules were first written by and for the desert fathers and mothers when they decided to live in proximity to one another and seek the counsel of a more experienced abba or amma.

Today, in Protestant circles, covenant groups and other spiritual direction groups have begun writing their own rule, or covenant, to ensure understanding of purpose among the group's members as well as mutual

accountability. Similarly, individuals are now writing their own rule of life as a way to commit to the practice of specific spiritual disciplines. The key is selecting spiritual disciplines that resonate with our souls, make sense for our lives, and challenge us to grow.

A rule of life is seldom longer than one page. Common elements include a statement of purpose and commitment to God and/or Jesus Christ, a list of six to ten promises to which the author(s) wishes to be held accountable, a concluding statement as to when the rule or covenant is to be reviewed and possibly revised, and the signature(s) of the author(s) for whom the rule is intended.

Promises for a covenant group might include "We will pray for each other between meetings of the group" and "We will serve in the community soup kitchen on the fourth Thursday of the month." Commitments for a personal rule of life might include "I will set aside a half hour every day for prayer, meditation, and Scripture reading" and "I will fast from television every Tuesday to spend more focused time with my family."

Living into Our Faith

Spirituality teaches us that religion without lived experience and recognition of God in the everyday is deadening to our souls. We are a diverse people with different gifts, challenges, strengths, struggles, and ways of responding to the longing for God that God has initiated in us. Spiritual disciplines are a resource that can enliven and empower us through Jesus Christ.

While some disciplines are similar and even overlap, others are discrete and distinct. Different disciplines work well at different times in our lives and not so well at others. It is up to us to determine which disciplines address our needs and energize us and to understand that what brings our neighbor closer to God and humanity may not do the same for us. The important thing is to select and persevere in the practice of those spiritual disciplines that can help us grow in truth, wisdom, hope, and love and allow us to live into our faith.

About the Writer

Diane Stephens is a retreat leader, spiritual director, congregational consultant, and affiliate faculty in spiritual formation at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois. She is coauthor of The Mothers of Many Styles Handbook: Understanding Your Personality Type in Mothering and author of Marketing Matters: A Practical Guide to Effective Communication.