

*Arvy Dupuy*

## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

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*2 Corinthians 5:17*

### *One Main Thing*

We act as if spiritual growth is automatic and comes without planning; it does not.

### *Introduction*

The excitement that a newborn baby brings is unfathomable. Everyone—family, friends, even neighbors—get involved and, in time, emotionally invest in the precious little one. As the child grows and takes their first steps or says their first words, everyone joins in the celebration. But what happens if the child does not grow properly? What do you do if universally accepted developmental milestones are delayed or worse—never happen? The response is immediate and declarative. Grandparents panic. Parents rush the child to the doctor and demand answers. Why? Because

physical growth is expected and if it does not happen, everyone knows that something is wrong.

### *Application*

In 2 Cor 5:17, Paul tells us that when we are in Christ (Gal 3:27) we are a new creation. As new creatures, we are like newborn babies that naturally crave spiritual milk (1 Pet 2:2). However, there is an expectation that we will grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18). When this growth does not happen, problems ensue and things are out of order (Heb 5:12). There is a clear biblical mandate that spiritual growth and development is expected and is the norm. When that maturation process does not occur, we must understand that something is wrong. Furthermore, once we recognize something is not as it should be, we must be willing to find out why.

If growth is expected, how does that growth take place? In college, I had a professor who believed in what he called “classroom osmosis.” He explained it this way: just show up to class, don’t be late, don’t disturb the other students, and I will give you five points on your final grade. He believed that by just showing up a student would learn something (i.e. through osmosis). I am not sure that is how it works but that is certainly how we have conducted business in churches for far too long. Once someone has professed Christ and been immersed into Him, too often we imply to them the only requirement moving forward is “just show up.” If

you do that, then everything will fall into place. We act as if spiritual growth is automatic and comes without planning or forethought; it does not.

There is no doubt that attendance is important. We should (and must) encourage and promote attendance at corporate worship and Bible classes. However, is that where real growth takes place? As important as all those times are, “spiritual osmosis” may not be all we sometimes credit it to be. In fact, the exact opposite is true. That is what the Hebrew writer is referencing in Heb 5:12 when he states, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” In verse 14 he continues, “solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” In short, he calls them out not for poor attendance, but for a lack of spiritual growth. They should have developed to the point of solid food but were still on milk. Something had delayed and stunted their growth and the writer says this is wrong.

A survey of believers indicates that real growth and transformation takes place through the habit and practice of spiritual disciplines—disciplines lived out away from corporate worship and classes. Hawkins and Parkinson found that there are several primary areas that catalyze spiritual growth. Organized church activities and spiritual beliefs are certainly among that list and

vitality important. However, there are others—others that have far too long been ignored. These additional areas have significant, impact on spiritual growth.

The first is our willingness to talk to others about our faith. Many of you may have participated in an evangelism class at some time. How long ago has it been? When was the last time you have intentionally put forth the effort to improve your ability to share your faith? Are you prepared to step through the door of opportunity if it presents itself today to talk about Jesus to others? Like any skill, we must be prepared to use it. Practice and model your reaction and response to people in varying situations. Put thought and prayer into how you can respond when people say things to you that will allow the conversation to turn to Christ. How often do you pray about sharing your faith with others? Are you prepared at any moment or situation to talk about the Lord? Do your actions demonstrate a commitment to the Great Commission? Sharing our faith is a spiritual discipline that everyone should possess and practice.

What about spiritual activities with others? Research shows that believers who understand their gifts and talents and are ready at a moment's notice to use them have a faith that is growing. True biblical service expects nothing in return; no thanks, no pats on the back or recognition, whether public or private. In fact, in Luke 14, Christ stated we should seek out those who can never repay us to serve. It is in meeting the needs of others that we find real purpose in our lives. We are

most like Jesus when we serve others. Every day we must live with the expectation that God will use us to serve someone that day. Not only should we serve but we must be a force to encourage and facilitate others being involved in service.

Another Monday to Saturday discipline that is vital to spiritual growth is reflection on God's word. Daily Bible reading is important, but our actions in this area must go beyond simply reading words on a page and checking off the daily assignment. Scripture must be the guide for the way we act and think all the time. We must understand the Bible to be not only the word of God, but also a provision of His instructions for our daily walk that is applicable to us today. Our worldview should not just be merely shaped by Scripture but defined by it. When we do read, our approach should begin with prayer—asking God to reveal truth to us and expose any areas of our lives that need to change. Approach the Bible with the expectation to discover a truth for daily living. When we finish reading, we might pray again, asking God to let us meditate on what we have just read so we may look for opportunities to apply it.

Prayer is also critical to cultivate spiritual depth in us. For most people who pray, their prayers are focused on themselves. In fact, respondents in a recent survey said they typically pray for their families and friends, along with praying for their needs, far more than anything or anyone else.<sup>1</sup> This anthropocentric approach to our

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1. Bob Smietana, LifeWayResearch.com: 2014.

prayer life mirrors how we live. What if we could shift our focus? What if we could pray to discover God's will more than expressing our own needs? Do we trust God to answer us when we pray and wait patiently for those answers in His time, not ours? Sadly, far too many believers expect growth in their prayer life but never intentionally seek ways to improve. Then there is balance—spending as much time talking to God as we do listening to Him. An active, vibrant prayer life includes thanksgiving, praise, and confession along with requests. Are we guilty of focusing only on one area to the exclusion of the others? If we believe the words of Jas 5:16, do our lives reflect a belief that our prayers impact our life and the lives of others? Certainly daily prayer is important, just as important is our approach and attitude to time communing with God. It is in our orison to the Father that we live out our complete dependence on Him.

It is G.K. Chesterton who is credited with saying, "Just going to church does not make you Christian any more than standing in your garage makes you a car." So it is that just showing up, hoping upon hope that through osmosis, spiritual growth will take place and we will evolve into the follower of Jesus we are called to be. Attendance is important. However, it cannot stand alone as the sole source of development. If the words of the Hebrew writer urging us to "press on to maturity," (Heb 6:1) are to become real to us, then we must adopt and integrate spiritual disciplines into our lives.

## *Conclusion*

It is time that we hold ourselves and others accountable. It is time that leadership clearly articulates an expectation that growth will happen and set in place structures that will facilitate this growth. It is time that those who have been on milk for far too long, move on to solid food. It is time for us to be the body that God intended for us to be: alive, active, and always growing.

## *Discussion*

1. Have you ever had a class on spiritual growth?
2. Why do you think this topic is not discussed more often?
3. Compare reading Scripture and meditating on Scripture.
4. How would you explain the church's allowance of long time Christians being infants in the faith?
5. What is the difference between hoping God will use us in His kingdom and expecting it?
6. Explain how best to maintain an attitude of prayer throughout the day.
7. What is the similarity between spiritual growth and conforming to the image of Christ?
8. Contrast leadership that holds members responsible and those that do not. What does that convey to the membership?

9. What is the importance of having a prayer life that includes praise and thanksgiving?