

Cultivating Practical Godliness

AN ESSAY BY

Donald Whitney

DEFINITION

Cultivating practical godliness is essential to the Christian life and is made up of pursuing spiritual disciplines that are both personal (bible reading, prayer, fasting, etc.) and interpersonal (baptism, the Lord's Supper, fellowship, family worship, etc.).

SUMMARY

Christians cultivate practical godliness in obedience to the Lord and in order to strive “for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” ([Heb. 12:14](#)). Discipline is essential to this task, both personally and interpersonally. These disciplines are activities that are not godliness themselves but help to put the Christian in the flow of God's grace. Personal spiritual disciplines include reading the Bible, praying, fasting, managing money well, journaling, and learning. Interpersonal spiritual disciplines include participating in the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) of the church, hearing the Word of God preached, worshiping and witnessing with the church, serving others, giving to the church, fellowshiping (not merely socializing) and praying with the church, and learning with the church.

Why is it important to cultivate practical godliness? For starters, the Lord commands us in [1 Timothy 4:7](#), “Train yourself for godliness.” Those God-breathed words carry the same authority as if spoken to you by the Lord Himself looking you directly in the eye. If you believe that, and want to obey God, then you'll cultivate practical godliness.

Second, you won't see the Lord after death if you don't strive for godliness in this life. For He says in [Hebrews 12:14](#), “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” It's not our striving for holiness (that is, godliness, Christlikeness, sanctification) that persuades the Lord to let us into Heaven. Rather it is the holiness of Christ Himself on our behalf—a holiness credited to us when we are united to Christ by faith—that qualifies us to see the Lord. Those who rely on Christ to make them right with God have been given the *Holy Spirit*. His holy presence creates holy hungers and longings for the holy things of God. And as Jonathan Edwards said, these are no “idle, ineffectual desires.” So those who are not acting on these holy impulses and not striving for holiness indicate they do not know the Holy One, and thus in eternity they will not “see the Lord.”

Discipline is Essential

Although the Holy Spirit produces the desire for godliness, progress in godliness isn't automatic. After all, God says, "Train *yourself* for godliness." The Spirit motivates and enables us to train ourselves, but He doesn't do the training for us. The practical, day-by-day obedience to the command is our Spirit-empowered responsibility.

The key to cultivating practical godliness in real life is discipline: intentional, ongoing participation in the God-given means of grace found in God's Word. That's why I prefer the New American Standard Bible's rendering of 1 Timothy 4:7, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." The "purpose" of the practice is godliness, that is, the "holiness without which no one will see the Lord." The God-designed responsibility you have in this lifelong pursuit is to "discipline yourself."

What kind of discipline? Well, obviously it's not bodily discipline (as the next verse—1 Tim. 4:8—makes clear), otherwise body-builders would be the godliest people on earth. Rather the Bible is referring to *spiritual* discipline. And the practices found in Scripture which cultivate practical godliness have come to be known as "the spiritual disciplines." So, the way we discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness is by practicing the biblical spiritual disciplines.

Disciplines Are Means, Not Ends

I don't suppose that any list of the spiritual disciplines is authoritatively complete. In part this is because there is some difference of opinion over what constitutes a biblical discipline/practice/habit and what is simply a matter of obedience to a biblical command. For instance, no one doubts that fasting is a biblical spiritual discipline, but is gratitude? Some would say it is, while others would teach that it is more of a Christlike character quality.

In general, I would contend that a spiritual discipline involves a specific activity, that is, something that you *do* rather than something you *are*. Thus fasting is an external activity; it can be evaluated in terms of duration, type (such as with or without liquids), and other factors. Describing what fasting is and how to do it is relatively straightforward.

Gratitude, on the other hand, is essentially an internal quality. It is much harder to evaluate objectively. And while true gratitude will be expressed outwardly, it's impossible to list all the ways it might be expressed.

Let's be very clear at this point: The spiritual disciplines found in Scripture are not marks of godliness in and of themselves. The Pharisees diligently practiced many spiritual disciplines, and even fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). But Jesus considered them the epitome of *ungodliness*. The Pharisees, just as many people today, saw the disciplines as *ends*, not *means*. They mistook the practice of spiritual disciplines *as* godliness, not a path *to* godliness.

Any practice—including those in the Bible—that can be measured, timed, counted, etc., is always subject to being wrongly equated with godliness. But that danger does not mean we should abandon the practices, for they are taught in Scripture. Remember that Jesus fasted, too (Matt. 4:2). Rather, our call is to practice the biblical spiritual disciplines, like Jesus, with the right motivation. That means we engage in the disciplines to *pursue* godliness. So to return to our example, gratitude is a mark of godliness; fasting can be a means to develop it. Therefore we should not fast merely to endure it and think we are more godly just because we've fasted. Rather we should fast for a biblical purpose, to pursue some godly goal such as an answer to prayer, deeper intimacy with Christ, or to cultivate a more Christlike character regarding a particular matter.

The same is true for any of the spiritual disciplines found in Scripture. We should practice them all, not with the mindset that we are impressing God or earning His favor, but in the pursuit of holy ends, that is, “for the purpose of godliness.”

Thus, the disciplines are like a pipe through which the water of God’s grace flows. Apart from God’s grace, the disciplines are empty of power to bless us or make us more godly. But practiced rightly and with biblical motivations, we can rely upon God’s grace to flow to us through them.

Personal Spiritual Disciplines

The biblical spiritual disciplines may be divided into two large groups: the personal spiritual disciplines (those you practice alone) and the interpersonal spiritual disciplines (those you practice with others). We’ll start with the personal disciplines because practical godliness begins with our individual relationship with the Lord.

The personal disciplines include all forms of Bible intake, prayer, private worship, fasting, stewardship of time and money, keeping a spiritual journal, godly learning, and more. But the two most important are the intake of the Word (God speaking to us) and prayer (our speaking to God).

Bible Intake

The disciplines directly involving the Bible involve hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, meditating on, and applying God’s Word. God made our hearts and minds, and He made them to be fed by the Word of God. It is primarily by the Spirit ministering to us through His Word that we grow in godliness. There simply is no substitute for the regular intake of the milk and meat of God’s Word.

Space permits us to elaborate on only two forms of Bible intake (for more, see Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, [chs. 2–3](#)). First is Bible reading. Just as we feed our bodies every day, we should seek to feed our souls every day on God’s Word. Jesus reiterated the Old Testament proclamation that, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” ([Matt. 4:4](#)). How shall we *live* “by every word that comes from the mouth of God” if we’ve never even *read* every word? I would encourage you not only to read the Bible every day, but also to try to read through the entire Bible (that is, “every word that comes from the mouth of God”) as often as you can. Countless Bible reading plans are available online, and they can take you systematically through the Scriptures. Each believer in Christ needs “the whole counsel of God” ([Acts 20:27](#)). Most people can read the entire Bible in a year by reading just fifteen minutes per day.

Second, meditation on Scripture is very important; in fact, it may be the single greatest devotional need of most Christians. The failure to meditate on something they’ve read is the main reason most Christians say they can’t remember what they’ve read. If it takes you two or three seconds to read each verse in a passage, no wonder you don’t remember! What sentences anywhere do you remember after looking at them for just two or three seconds?

It is through meditation that the information on the page becomes experience in our hearts and lives. By reading we learn the truth of God; it is by meditation that we feel it. Reading the Bible, for example, teaches us “God is love” ([1 John 4:8](#)). But it is through meditation that we begin to feel the love of God, in biblically appropriate ways. And only when our hearts are moved do we more willingly obey in the ways of practical godliness.

How do you meditate on Scripture? Simply choose a verse from your reading and think about it. Ask questions of it. Emphasize one word or phrase at a time. There's not just one way to meditate on Scripture. The book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* describe seventeen different ways to meditate on something in the Bible (46–69).

So, the general rule for the intake of God's Word each day is read big, meditate small. Read a big section, such as a chapter or more. Then choose something small—such as one verse, phrase, or word—and meditate on that. If you have only ten minutes, don't read for ten minutes. Read for five and meditate for five. Far better to read less (if necessary) and remember and be affected by something, than to read more and remember nothing. By so doing you'll discover that you can recall throughout the day what you've meditated on, and thus be able to do what the Bible says when it exhorts us to meditate “day and night” (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2).

Prayer

All those indwelt by the Spirit want to pray, for both Romans (8:15) and Galatians (4:6) declare that He causes us to cry, “Abba! Father!” Those who know God find themselves spontaneously talking to their Father throughout the day, often in brief, “arrow” prayers (as they used to be called). But these random, momentary prayers are never enough to satisfy hearts turned Godward by the Holy Spirit. Progress in personal godliness requires the cultivation of habits of prayer, both alone and with others. The apostle Paul goes so far as to say to us all, “Devote yourselves to prayer” (Col. 4:2). At the very least this means more than just shooting an occasional arrow of prayer into Heaven.

Many, though, find consistent prayer impeded by at least two obstacles: they seem too busy to pray and when they do pray, it's often boring.

Regarding busyness, we're back to discipline, aren't we? Almost everyone today feels like they have more to do every day than they have time for. But do we really want to say we have no time to talk to God? Just as we do with other loved ones, we must make time to talk with the one we love the most.

But when prayer is boring, our discipline weakens. Prayer will be boring if you say the same old things about the same old things every time. Even when talking to God, words without variety eventually become words without meaning. The problem is not that we pray *about* the same old things, for that's normal. Our lives tend to consist of the same things from one day to the next—the same people, location, work, needs, etc. The problem is that we tend to *say* the same things about the same things. That's boring.

What's the solution, a solution simple enough for all God's people? Here it is: when you pray, pray the Bible. Turn the words of Scripture into the words of your prayers. Although, once learned, you can do this from any part of the Bible, the easiest places to do this are the Psalms and the New Testament letters.

So if you were to pray through Psalms 23, you'd read the first line—“The Lord is my shepherd”—and pray something like, “Thank You, Lord, that You are my Shepherd. You are a good shepherd. Please shepherd my family; cause them to love You as their Shepherd as I love You as my Shepherd. Please shepherd me in the decision before me. Shepherd those at the church who shepherd us.” Continue praying about whatever is prompted by “The Lord is my shepherd.” When nothing else comes to mind, go to the next line that prompts prayer, and continue in this way until you run out of time.

Any Christian can do this. You'll never run out of anything to say, and you'll never again say the same old things in prayer. You'll pray about both the matters you usually want to pray about (but in new ways) as well as things you never pray about. And by so doing you'll follow the example of Jesus who prayed from two Psalms on the cross ([Matt. 27:46](#); [Luke 23:46](#)), Christians in the book of Acts (4:24-26), and countless followers of Christ since.

Interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines

Personal godliness extends beyond our private lives. And the means to godliness involves more than just our devotion to the personal spiritual disciplines. Christlikeness involves our relationship to all things, people, and situations. We must think of godliness as it relates both to the inward life and the outward life, to both the church and the world, to the saved and the lost.

Christlikeness *toward* others and *by the help of* others is essential to biblical Christianity. That's where the interpersonal spiritual disciplines come in. The disciplines we practice in the presence of others are where we both display progress in Christlikeness and are stimulated toward Christlikeness.

What Are They?

The interpersonal spiritual disciplines found in Scripture include gathering with and becoming a confessing member of the church, participating in the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) of the church, hearing the Word of God preached, worshiping and witnessing with the church, serving others, giving to the church, fellowshiping (not merely socializing) and praying with the church, and learning with the church. Although done in the home, family worship could be included with this list as it's not quite a personal spiritual discipline.

Many of these disciplines are enjoyed with the entire congregation. Others occur in a small group situation, and some are experienced one-on-one. Most of them are practiced primarily in a church setting; a few (particularly acts of service and group witness) can (and often should) be done intentionally in a non-Christian environment.

Involvement in these disciplines, just as with the personal ones, should be a delight and not a mere duty. It is work of the Holy Spirit who makes it so. He's the One who gives us a binding love for other believers, so much so that "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers," ([1 John 3:14](#)). Christians realize that God's Spirit indwells other believers and that so much of His ministry to us is through them. So, to distance ourselves from regular, meaningful engagement with other believers in biblical ways is to cut ourselves off from so much of the Lord's ministry to us. And no Christian wants to experience that.

And now?

1. Remember that the desire for godliness and the disciplines is given by the Spirit, but the practice of the disciplines often feels like it's all you. When you wake up on Sunday morning, you may not feel like going to church. But what makes you willing to get out of a warm bed and get ready for church when most of your neighbors will not? A desire produced by the Holy Spirit that's greater than laziness. But that doesn't make you feel less sleepy. On a weekday, He doesn't drag you to a chair and open the pages of the Bible for you. It feels like it's all you. But God's Spirit gets credit for the desire to discipline yourself and pick up the Scriptures.

Cultivating practical godliness is often more “fight” than “flow.” The Bible reminds us that “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” ([Gal. 5:17](#)). The flesh—that part of Spirit-indwelled people on this side of Heaven that still finds sin appealing—will pull like gravity against anything that cultivates godliness. Disciplining yourself to follow the promptings of the Spirit is the Christlike response.

2. Sow to the Spirit in at least two practical ways. The Bible says, “The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” ([Gal. 6:8](#)). The words, “the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life,” are another way of saying, “Strive . . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Those indwelled by the Spirit want to sow to the Spirit.

How, practically, do we do that? Just as no farmer sows a crop accidentally, so Christians must sow to the Spirit intentionally. This essay has been about how to do that. You sow to the Spirit by disciplining yourself for the purpose of godliness. When you practice the biblical spiritual disciplines you are placing seeds of godliness into your soul that the Spirit grows into Christlikeness.

But you have to put them there. So, may I suggest that you prayerfully select at least one “seed” from the personal spiritual disciplines and one from the interpersonal disciplines and plant them firmly into your life? Perhaps it will be one you’ve practiced one before but abandoned. Perhaps there’ll be one you’ve never practiced before, but the Spirit is prompting you now to plant it. Don’t let the time invested to read these pages about cultivating personal godliness be fruitless!

FURTHER READING

Cultivating Personal Godliness

- Jerry Bridges, [*The Practice of Godliness*](#)
- Jerry Bridges, [*The Pursuit of Holiness*](#)
- John Bunyan, [*The Pilgrim’s Progress*](#)
- Kevin DeYoung, [*The Hole in Our Holiness*](#)

Personal Spiritual Disciplines

- David Mathis, [*Habits of Grace*](#)
- Donald S. Whitney, [*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*](#)
- Donald S. Whitney, [*Praying the Bible*](#)
- Tim Keller, [*Prayer*](#)

Interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines

- 9Marks, hundreds of articles on this [site](#) and their books
- Donald S. Whitney, [*Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*](#)
- Joanne J. Jung, [*The Lost Discipline of Conversation*](#)
- Mark Dever, [*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*](#)

This essay is part of the Concise Theology series. All views expressed in this essay are those of the author. This essay is freely available under Creative Commons License with Attribution-ShareAlike, allowing users to share it in other mediums/formats and adapt/translate the content as long as an attribution link, indication of changes, and the same Creative Commons License applies to that material. If you are interested in translating our content or are interested in joining our community of translators, [please reach out to us](#).

