UPGRADES AND OTHER PERKS

“Be not angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, since you cannot make yourself as you wish to be.” This quote has plagued me since the first time I read it because it speaks to a sense of powerlessness to change the negative things about ourselves. We are powerless, yes, if we depend on our own abilities, but with God’s transforming grace we have all the power we need to grow.

We started with owning our bad stuff and making the choice to stop it, but we can’t end there. We need to replace the bad with something good. You probably have known people who quit smoking and took up chewing gum, or people who stopped eating fast food and developed a healthier diet. We don’t want to leave a void when we take something away.

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that life must have balance, time for things to end and others to begin. So it is with us; we need to turn our vices into virtues. One way to do this is through the practice of spiritual disciplines. A discipline is not a punishment, neither is it a distraction to keep our mind off our undesired behavior.

If we have a negative view of the word discipline, how can we put a positive spin on it? Calling it spiritual opportunities? Spiritual growth mechanisms? There’s a reason why no one builds a theme park based on prayer or communion or Bible study. No one finds that as exciting as Disney World or Universal Studios. You’d have to be a real Bible or theology nerd to want to read ancient Hebrew or Greek, or maybe you just have to be able to surrender yourself to God’s will.

We’d all like to be like the early followers of Jesus mentioned in Acts 2, *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”*  We’d like to say that’s what our experience of faith is like, but unfortunately, as one satirical comic illustrates, we have a way to go.

A pastor is talking with Jesus about his church. He says, “I think I’ve got a good analogy for the Kingdom of God for this Sunday’s sermon, Jesus. A river!” Jesus responds, “It’s been done so many times, Joe. It’s obvious. I’d go with a swimming pool.” “Okaaay. Any hints on how to elaborate?” “The Kingdom of God is like unto a swimming pool, and most of you are splashing around in the shallow end.”

On that note, let’s look at what some spiritual leaders have said about spiritual discipline. Henri Nouwen said they were a means to “create space to meet with God that you otherwise had not planned on.” Author Robert Mulholland said they are “Things that intrude into our lives to align us with God’s purpose. Bishop Reuben Job wrote, “Spiritual disciplines teach us to live our lives in harmony with something larger than ourselves and larger than that which the world values as ultimate.”

There is no automatic way of becoming proficient at spiritual disciplines. Like all things in life we pursue, they take time and practice. We must be intentional about developing these means of growth. I am chief among sinners when it comes to consistent spiritual discipline, so I speak from experience. I’m not 100% tuned in to the word of God all day. I utter quick and lackluster prayers. I end the day knowing I’ve disappointed God by hanging around the shallow end a little.

The good news is that Jesus himself practiced the spiritual disciplines of His day, which made Him a faithful follower of His Father. All we can do to become closer followers is to imitate Christ. The goal of discipleship is not to become a better person, or even a good person; the goal is forming the nature of Messiah within and deliberately and lovingly serving God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We can’t impose our own expectations on whatever discipline we choose. We can’t tell God how we want it to work, or how quickly we want to see change. It’s a relationship, a process, a transformation, three things that should never be done in haste. There is a Biblical mandate we can use to keep us motivated. 1 Timothy 4:7 says, *“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness. For physical training is of some value, but godliness is of value in everything and in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and for the life to come.”*

In examining spiritual disciplines, we are talking about things that are practices taught or modeled in Scripture. The reason this is important is otherwise we leave ourselves open to calling anything we want a spiritual discipline. Someone might say, "Gardening is a spiritual discipline."

One of the problems with that mindset is someone could be tempted to say, "Maybe meditation on Scripture works for you, but gardening does just as much for my soul as the Bible does for yours." The other problem is that it leaves us to determine what will be best for our spiritual health and maturity rather than accepting those things God has revealed in Scripture as the means of experiencing God and growing in Christlikeness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As United Methodists we are familiar with what Wesley called the means of grace. These include communion, worship, prayer, fasting, Christian conversation, and studying the Bible. Each of these is a spiritual discipline we might engage in, but as we have no time to discuss all of them, I suggest we start with prayer. This may seem like a straightforward practice, but if you've ever felt inept at prayer, you are not alone.

Our lack of knowledge about prayer does not undercut its importance in our lives, however. John Wesley knew that a life of prayer was not an accident or a natural consequence of just living. He was convinced that a life of prayer was the result of a determined and disciplined effort.

This is evident in his statement, "Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way...do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer." It's been said that "If you don't breathe, you die. If you don't pray, you die spiritually."

Jesus demonstrated the importance of prayer in His daily life. For Him it was as natural as breathing. The disciples only asked Jesus to teach them one thing, how to pray, because He had just finished telling them how not to pray. His answer, recorded in Luke's gospel, has been named the Lord's Prayer, a model prayer to follow, but we should be encouraged to discern its components along with memorizing its words.

Two Christians were trying to outdo each other. The conversation came around to prayer. One said, "I'll bet $20 you can't even say the Lord's Prayer." The other replied, "It's a bet." He began, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." The first man interrupted, "Okay, here's your money. I didn't think you could do it."

We should know that those words we repeat each week have as much in common with the Old Testament as they do with the New Testament. As a human being, Jesus was a faithful Jewish believer. He practiced His faith as all good Hebrew people would. tHe would have prayed a common prayer still used among Jewish believers today.

These verses from Deuteronomy 6 are referred to as the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for listen or hear. *"Listen, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, and as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."*

In order to truly love God, the first thing we have to be able to do is listen. Listening means paying attention to what God has said and is doing in the world and in our own lives, and aligning ourselves with those things. Listen and love – the full and divine life can be boiled down to these two wonderful words, an entry into a way of life full of the Spirit.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This is a great transitional way to understand the Lord's Prayer, because anyone who could love God with their whole being would be able to pray for God's will to be done, and also be aware of their need to receive and extend forgiveness to others, as well as asking God for daily provision and protection.

The other connection this prayer has to the Old Testament is its similarity in structure to the Ten Commandments. The commandments are divided between our moral obligations to God and our moral obligations to others. Likewise, the Lord's Prayer is composed of two sections; the first includes two petitions relating to God, and the second has three petitions relating to ourselves.

This is where we begin to see the relationship this prayer has to all other forms of prayer, given the balance between praying for God's will and for our own needs. Mere repetition of recorded words is not the same as praying from within your deep longing for God. Whether we can pray these petitions with integrity is a searching test of the reality and depth of our Christian profession.

The three petitions which Jesus puts upon our lips are beautifully comprehensive. they cover, in principle, all our human need – material, spiritual, and moral. What we are doing whenever we pray this prayer is to express our dependence on God in every area of our human life.[[4]](#footnote-4)

To quote the author of *Mere Discipleship*, “We lay before God what we want God to do for us, telling God how we want God to run the world and fix our problems and provide simple solutions for what ails us. But this fails to account for the true heart of prayer: laying ourselves before God, submitting our will to God's will. In prayer, we stake our lives, ourselves, our cause upon God's cause, and are invited by Jesus – we are commanded by Jesus – to rattle God's cage, to stir God up, to prompt God to be about the work of establishing the kingdom."[[5]](#footnote-5)

Realize, of course, that this is just a starting point. You can pray in many ways, and none of them have to be exactly like someone else's. For example, you can personalize passages of Scripture and use them as prayer, just by substituting your name for the pronouns in the verses. The psalms are particularly good for that practice.

Maybe prayer is already a foundational part of your spiritual life, so another discipline appeals to you more. There are many to choose from, like a daily program for reading Scripture, devotionals both in print and online, delivered right to your email, or study groups you can join. There are free Christian courses online, prayer groups, and self-directed spiritual retreats.

Beyond these are what John Wesley called works of mercy, which in our society may translate into volunteering at a food bank or an elementary school, or a hospice organization or participating in a prayer shawl ministry, or visiting shut ins, just to name a few. Just remember to let them be defined by Scripture and not by society. Check Matthew 25 if you need reminders.

The point of replacing something negative in your life with something positive is not to keep yourself distracted from what you're giving up. The point is to grow in your humanity, to make progress in your spiritual formation, to become closer to that person God sees when He looks at you. Consider it an upgrade.

I've made some suggestions today to get you thinking, but only you can determine if it's time for you to change anything about your life. Maybe you're hesitant, unsure, afraid. That’s understandable because change is hard, it's challenging, it's uncomfortable. Maintaining the familiar is always going to be easier. We all have choices to make. Next week we'll go further into letting go and letting God.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. www.spiritualdiscipline.org [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Collins, Jon, *The Bible Project Quarterly*, Fall 2017, pg. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stott, John, *A Deeper Look at the Sermon on the Mount*, pg. 120-121 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Camp, Lee C., *Mere Discipleship – Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World*, pg. 173 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)