

Introduction

The Disciplines are for the purpose of realising a greater good. In and of themselves they are of no value whatever. They have value only as a means of setting us before God so that he can give us the liberation we seek. The liberation is the end; the Disciplines are merely the means.

- Richard Foster, *Celebration of the Disciplines*, p. 138

During this season of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have often lost sight of the fact that the Spiritual Disciplines are *merely the means to liberation* in Christ. “I will devote x amount of *more* hours a day in prayer and devotion” I said at the beginning of government mandated shutdowns. “With more time at home, I’m going get deep into the discipline of study and sharpen my Biblical Greek and Hebrew.” I spent a lot of time in self-talk and in my journal sketching out how *I am* going to do “level up” in my Spiritual Disciplines not realizing the I was operating in my flesh rather than in the Spirit of God. I confess that my practice of the Spiritual Disciplines has not met the level of expectations I envisioned at the start of the pandemic. In God’s providence, this field education course has caused me to humbly and thoughtfully reflect on the proper and right use and approach to the Spiritual Disciplines Foster details in his classic work *Celebration of the Disciplines: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. This semester has led me to rely on the outward disciplines in ways that led to spiritual growth and liberation. The Lord has revealed to me that without the fullness of Christ and the Spirit in my life, the Spiritual Disciplines are unprofitable (Col. 1:15-19; 4:2-6). I am thankful that God exposed the superficial approach to the Spiritual Disciplines in this season of pandemic. “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty” that I will live in the freedom that Christ desires for me and all his children (Zech. 4:6).

My Experiences in the Outward Disciplines

I practice the discipline of simplicity primarily in my communication with God and others. In his words to the disciples in Matthew 7:7, Jesus implores them to be bold and straightforward in approaching God in prayer and supplication, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” Keener comments that “even as a general principle, the boldness with which this text promises answers to prayer is quite rare in ancient literature; only a few special men of God were thought to obtain most of what they requested.”¹ In Psalm 17, David approaches God in prayer with same spirit of simplicity and boldness declared in Matthew 7:7.

1 Hear me, Lord, my plea is just; listen to my cry. Hear my prayer—it does not rise from deceitful lips. 2 Let my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right.

6 I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer. 7 Show me the wonders of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes. 8 Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings 9 from the wicked who are out to destroy me, from my mortal enemies who surround me.

- (Psalm 17:1-2,6-9)

God has given us permission to ask simply, without worrying that our naked requests are unworthy of God. Mark D. Roberts points out “in fact, too much attention to using just the right words builds a barrier between us and God, not a bridge.” Applying simplicity to our prayer life looks like talking to God.”²

Foster argues “the Christian discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward life-style. Both the inward and the outward aspects of simplicity are essential. We deceive ourselves if we believe we can possess the inward reality without it having a profound

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, Second Edition*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014), p. 63

² Mark D. Roberts. *No Holds Barred: Wrestling with God in Prayer*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Pres, 2005), p. 21

effect on how we live.... Simplicity begins in inward focus and unity.”³ Applying simplicity in my own prayer life has liberated me to bare my heart before God boldly and without shame.

I have also applied Foster’s thinking about the discipline of simplicity in my conversations. Jesus says, “All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matt 5:37). Assumptive of what people are thinking breeds anxiety when I talk to people in my work environment. Embracing simplicity has released me of this anxiety.

Scheduled into my Google Calendar are my morning and evening devotional times. In the description it includes “No electronics, eliminate distractions.” According to Foster, “the purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to hear see and hear. Control rather than no noise is the key to silence.”⁴ Hearing God’s voice requires the intentional letting go of my own priorities, removal of distractions and the refraining from other obligations that will interfere with my time alone with God. Foster refers to early morning and evening times of devotions as “little solitudes.” The ultimate goal of my times of “little solitude” or brief spiritual retreats to enter God’s presence and to hear his voice in the present moment. Solitude for Foster can be simply entering moments “rest and refreshment” where you take a “few moments of gathered silence” to appreciate the handiwork of God in nature or before partaking in a meal that the Lord ultimately provided.⁵ I love taking short retreats of solitude in some of New York City’s parks. Somedays there is nothing better than laying out on a yoga mat or blanket and simply soaking in the sun and scenery of Prospect Park while in the presence of God.

Recent and unanticipated family challenges led me to morning long periods of solitude. To facilitate these particular times of silence, I would play quite worship/soaking music as an aid

³ Richard J. Foster. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path of Spiritual Growth*. (London: Hodder, 2008), p. 100

⁴ Ibid, p. 123

⁵ Ibid, p. 130

to meditation. Sometimes we have to stop everything we are doing and come before God in total surrender to him. I believe solitude is inseparable from the discipline of submission. In fact, in all of the disciplines require our submission to God, the word and the Spirit.

I believe that my submitting to God's call for healing my life was a practice in the discipline of submission. On March 24, 2021 in my PPTFM class Dr. Ron Walborn asked if anyone needed healing in the class, following his lecture on Divine Healing. Since 2017 I have suffered with ulcerative colitis. Scheduled for a Colonoscopy for March 26 and struggling for weeks with this medical condition, I had finally decided that I will fully believe God for healing in my body. I answered Dr. Walborn's call for healing and as he prayed and laid his hands on me, I experienced the presence of God upon my body as all of the symptoms of my abdominal pain and cramping ceased. However, the Lord released me from the soul wounds of shame, revealed to Dr. Walborn while praying over me. It was first time I cried since high school. I was finally willing to let go of the weight of shame that was burdening my soul for several years.

Days prior to Dr. Walborn's prayer over me, I had been dealing with rectal bleeding and instance abdominal pains. The results of my colonoscopy revealed a healed ulcer with fresh scar tissue. A week later my biopsy came back clean. To be honest, I my unbelief kept me from submitting my colitis to God for his miraculous healing. Not only am I thankful for Dr. Walborn's healing pray and the healing presence of the Spirit, but I am also thankful for the Spirit's role in leading me to submit and surrender to him.

"Service is not a list of things that we do," states Foster, "though in it we discover things to do. It is not a code of ethics, but a way of living. To do specific acts of service is not the same things as living in the Discipline of service."⁶ Service as a lifestyle is how I have approached my several callings during this season of COVID-19. As high school teacher, the discipline of

⁶ Ibid, p. 165

service means going above and beyond my professional duties in order provide students with supports and resources that make up for their lost time in in-person learning. I have spent dozens of hours after work and on weekends supporting students in 1:1 session in-order to complete course work or receive social-emotional support. Service for my church during COVID-19 meant investing a lot to time and money in transitioning my church for hybrid ministry. For my internship at Miller Evangelical Union Church, the discipline of service comes down to the several hours I spend in preparing for my teaching and preaching assignments, but also volunteering my time support the church's development of their virtual ministry experience.

Conclusion

Foster encourages his readers to “forever centre on Christ and view the Spiritual Disciplines as a way of drawing us closer to his heart.”⁷ The Outward Spiritual Disciplines (Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, Service) go hand-in-hand with Inward Disciplines (Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, Study). Taking into account the need to practice both the inward and outward disciplines together, practicing Foster's disciplines has had deeper impact on my life. I now seek the Spiritual Disciplines as a *means* to liberation as opposed to going through the motions of a dead and rigid behavior modification that only leads to spiritual captivity.

⁷ Ibid, p. 138

Bibliography

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