

Spiritual Disciplines Paper

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Prior to this class, I have had a decent amount of experience with various spiritual disciplines. I'll add that I have yet to achieve a simple and consistent pace. I've gone through various seasons of constructing and reconstructing habits and rhythms, gradually learning what works for me and what does not work. My tendency is to overdo it or overthink and over track it, as was the case with the nine disciplines this semester. Finally, I landed on practicing them in simplicity and grace rather than perfecting them. Below are my summaries of the spiritual disciplines I've practiced this semester and some of the accompanying results and revelations.

The Spiritual Discipline of Generosity

Even though I lean toward generosity quite easily, this discipline still surprises me. When God calls upon me to provide a financial gift, and then to tell my wife that another financial gift has been requested, is still challengingly joyful. This semester during my own sabbatical, I sensed God desires for me to gift a co-worker with a larger financial gift for her sabbatical. Along with the financial amount came the sense that this gift was meant to be used by them for something joyful and leisurely.

Upon sharing about the gift with my coworker, they reflected, prayed, and got back to me. In the past year, she was deserted by their spouse and forced to live in a halfway home. She shared that even the little things had profound hurt, such as passing flowers in a store or on a walk and feeling like no one would ever give her flowers again or that she could never afford to garden them again, as she did at her former home.

After she prayed, she sensed God wanting to use the gift to give her flowers. The amount of money allowed her to sign up for a local farming co-op that also grows flowers. As a result of

our obedience to generosity, my coworker will be able to receive fresh-cut flowers every week during her sabbatical!

The Discipline of Simplicity

I'm a recovering perfectionist and I struggle with simplicity of thought. Numerous people have made attempts to help, such as sharing the 80/20 Principle and books. And what's more – I like my coffee! Close to the first retreat, I decided to practice some spending simplicity around my enjoyment of coffee. I don't often spend much on coffee, but for the week I decided that whatever I spent, I would use gift cards that had accumulated over the years. I know this sounds more like conscious spending and frugality, but it was a start. I am hoping to transfer simplicity into my thought life, spiritual disciplines, and decision-making by practicing taking my thoughts and decisions captive to Christ (Matthew 6:33; 2 Corinthians 3:5).

Additionally, I also practiced simplicity during the second retreat by choosing to execute it in a simple way, instead of making it logistically and intellectually heavy.

The Discipline of Study

I have been practicing this discipline throughout the semester. Being that this is my first semester in graduate school, I am learning how to read at this level and with the required frequency. Early in the semester, there was a temptation, and corresponding advice from friends to skim read everything. In spite of the temptation and the advice, I have intentionally adjusted my approach so that the spiritually formative materials get the best available reading time. I am not in seminary to skim read or earn a degree; rather, I am here for the formation and education God desires for me. He also desires to take hurry out of my ministry, mind, and education. So,

this discipline in the approach to my reading strategy is keeping His will for me in seminary at the forefront of my studies.

Additionally, this discipline was practiced during both silent retreats.

The Discipline of Solitude

Solitude and silence are my favorite disciplines. If I had to pick an anchor discipline, it would be solitude, with Scripture to give it legs. In solitude, silence, and stillness, I find that the needed things come to the surface, be they other disciplines, like prayer, or simple time with God reminding me of my standing in Him.

During one period of solitude, I began to pray for my wife and she experienced relief. There was another time this semester when I began to couple solitude with the practice of ten minutes of silence and stillness prior to praying. After the ten minutes, I found that I was even more ready to pray, being much more open to God's will. This discipline was practiced during both retreats.

The Discipline of Fasting

Because of moodiness and migraines, I tend to shy away from fasting. But I tried fasting twice this semester. The first time was during the first retreat when I fasted to focus on Biehl's book and reflection. Usually, when I'm fasting at home, it is still distracting as I usually break my focus to head to the kitchen to make coffee or tea in place of grabbing a snack. But fasting during the retreat and being away allowed for a lot of focus until about sixteen hours in, when my eyes were reading the words on the page but nothing was getting to my brain. I don't know if that was due to low blood sugar or from reading more than three quarters of the book while writing fifteen pages worth of reflection.

The second time of fasting was a two-day partial fast where I only ate at dinner. This time of fasting was to help me shift focus as I started my sabbatical. The one issue was that I had overbooked those first few days with heavy conversations with my therapist and my spiritual director, which were compounded by the fasting. It was productive during the spiritual direction, but the therapy session was too much. In the future, I will likely not couple fasting with heavy social interaction.

The Discipline of Prayer

I confess that I was less than successful at integrating the Guyon reading and the three times of prayer weekly. However, when I was able to reflect and pray, the abovementioned integration of the ten minutes of silence and stillness proved powerful, not only for my focus but also for helping me to experience a connection with the Lord. I generally feel a strong pull toward productivity that conflicts with prayer. But the idea of the Daily Office, or Opus, is reminding me that prayer is the work. I've struggled to make this systematic, but I'm starting to realize that it's the internal change of posture toward and partnership with God that has been missing in me. This discipline also happened during the retreats.

The Discipline of Service

We started going to our current church two years ago. They have a men's ministry, and it was the first time in ten years that I was able to attend a men's ministry on a regular basis! The theme captivated me, and I felt blessed to attend. Last fall, there was a need for someone to help coordinate the men's retreat and the director tapped on me for help. It went very well!

This semester, I was asked to join the leadership. Instead of outright saying yes, I first brought it to God in prayer because of my predisposition to overcommit. While in prayer, I

sensed the Lord leaving the decision up to my discretion. I decided to say yes to co-leading and this has been part of my discipline of service. Thought it, God has been showing me how to lead with limits. Unlike my missionary work on campus, this men's ministry is not solely my responsibility. I'm getting the chance to lead without being at the center of every decision and "playing in someone else's sandbox" is providing a new sense of humility and shared ministry that I would like to see shape my mission work.

The Discipline of Submission

This semester, I am primarily practicing this discipline by being on sabbatical. And even during my sabbatical, I'm finding daily submission to be at odds with self-determination, procrastination, and external pressures. I have a tremendous amount of trouble releasing control and submitting to another's authority. It was also difficult to work this semester, wanting to start new ministry, but realizing I wouldn't be around to grow and sustain it. There are so many new things I wanted to start and so many more students I wanted to reach out to. I have been finding that I need to submit the fears, the undone things, and the unreached things to God in order to obey in this rest. It's very hard. Releasing control and awareness of details is scary, too. Even now, I want to manage every detail because I want a guaranteed return on my time and effort. But this desire is more aligned with rebellion than with submission.

The Discipline of Confession

There has been a lot of confession in my marriage this semester. It seems there is a correlation between busyness and confession in our marriage – my wife and I are very driven by work and productivity and usually someone's feelings are hurt. I'm usually the first to feel hurt and I tend to experience bitterness, resentment, and an inability to celebrate the other. Confession

has often characterized our relationship because we realized early on that it was the best way to honor God and lift each other up before issues and sins are allowed to fester and take the form of judgement, bitterness, anger, and wrath.

What caught me off-guard in this season of our marriage where there was a lot for my wife to celebrate but that I had felt lonely for so long that I was lacking capacity to celebrate her achievements. Celebration is probably the discipline I struggle with the most. That goes hand-in-hand with gratitude.

Travis Skinner's Spiritual Disciplines Report Form			
Date	Discipline	How you practiced	Results
Feb 16	Service/Generosity	Gave time to meal prep for the unhoused	
Feb 14-18	Simplicity/Frugality	avoided paying for coffee, used gift cards, etc	Kept spending in check, created consciousness around habitual, need gratifying spending
Ongoing	Study	I have intentionally avoided skim-reading SF books Chunk-reading Scripture	I want the formation and I'm finding that the required reading volume is tempting me to hurry. I am looking to unhurry. This is resulting in increased stress in the short-term, but increased reading time in my calendar in the long-term. I don't normally skim read anyway.
Ongoing/Feb	Solitude (silence and stillness)	This has been a long-time favorite. The new practice has been the intro of the 10 minutes of silence and stillness	During one of the silences, I realized that after 10 minutes of silence and stillness, I was more ready to pray and receive God's will rather than rattle off a laundry list! It was during this particular session that I prayed for my wife and she experienced healing.
Feb 12	Fasting	I fasted during the first retreat	I noticed I was able to concentrate entirely on the reading. I allowed for coffee. I also observed that food tastes significantly better after fasting!
	Meditation		
February	Prayer	Weekly times of silence leading to deeper, more authentic places of prayer leading to openness to God's will	During prayer this month, I started with 10 minutes of silence and stillness. I discovered a deeper peace and openness to the presence and will of God.
	Service	servicing on men's ministry leadership	God gave me the option of saying yes or no to this. I chose to say yes. God has been showing me how to lead with limits and without being at the center of a ministry. Playing in someone else's sandbox, etc.
Feb through March	Submission	Starting a sabbatical	I am nearing the beginning of a 4-month sabbatical (March-July). As it nears, I am noticing anxiety and fear around making sure I delegate everything. I also recognize a difficulty in releasing ministry - there are so many new things I'd like to start and so many more students I would like to reach out to, but I am leaving and will not be there for follow-through. I am finding that I need to submit the fears, the undones, and the unreached and unstarted to God in order to obey in this rest. It's very hard. Releasing control and awareness of details is scary, too.
Jan-March; ongoing	Confession	conversations with wife	confessing the places of loneliness, bitterness, and resentment in marriage instead of finding ways to stoke jealousy, get even, or be passive-aggressive/leak.
	Worship		
Jan-March	Guidance	Regular meetings with spiritual director	These included life transition meetings into seminary.
March	Celebration	Celebrating the start of sabbatical: a family trip to Baltimore	Celebration is often the hardest and least practiced for me. So many times, I move on to the next thing rather than slowing down to celebrate. It's the same pattern that interrupts my abiding.
March	Generosity (again)	felt led by God to gift a co-worker with a larger sum of money	She shared what the gift would provide for her during her sabbatical and some recovery from a traumatic life transition. I felt overjoyed to gift such an important thing at a needed time. My wife got to share this humble sense of gratitude.