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Spiritual Formation Paper
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I have been a Christian for over half my life. It was not until this class that I was formally introduced to and taught about the practice of spiritual disciplines. I have come to understand how vitally important it is to serve God intentionally through the practice of spiritual disciplines that support spiritual growth and maturity. I believe I have grown in my Christian walk since rededicating my life to Christ in 1996. I am thankful for the ministry in which I rededicated my life. While my life has been devoted to prayer, the study of God's word, corporate worship, acts of service and other acts typically associated with being a Christian, I can look back and reflect on that I did not have a solid foundation on how the practice of spiritual disciplines are vehicles for spiritual growth.

Some of the things I was taught in my Christian walk is that I must pray, attend church, praise God in worship, help others, be kind, turn the other cheek, read the bible, have faith and rebuke the devil. While all these things are true, the spiritual discipline required to continually draw closer to God was missing. I have come to learn through in the time that I have been practicing spiritual disciplines, that I am experiencing life in a different way. My Christian walk has been impacted in meaningful ways since coming to understand how to practice spiritual disciplines. The purpose of this paper will be to explain how the nine spiritual disciplines I have been practicing have impacted me spiritually, emotionally, behaviorally and in my thought life as it relates to my Christian walk.

In my Christian walk, I have been on many retreats. None of those retreats were silent retreats where I was listening for God to speak to me. None of those retreats were in solitude.

Every retreat that I had ever attended had a theme selected by the retreat planning committees. I had never gone away alone just to spend time with God. As I planned the date for the first silent retreat, I felt fear grip me. I did not understand why. My mind raced and was flooded with thoughts about: (1) what would happen, (2) who would be taking care of my family members while I was gone, (3) how would God reveal Himself, (4) what would God say to me, (5) what would it mean if God didn't say anything. I knew these thoughts were not from God. I also knew that He did not give me a spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind. (Bible, 2 Tim. 1:7)

At the first silent retreat, I practiced the spiritual disciplines of solitude, meditation, prayer and study. As I defined silence, I saw it as not speaking. I came to learn that silence is much more than remaining quiet. As different thoughts raced through my head for the first two hours, it came to me that I was not completely silent at all. I prayed in my head and asked God to help me be silent and to quiet my thoughts, emotions, and spirit. The thoughts continued to race through my mind for some time. The Lord spoke to me and said, "Rest." After a while, I began to be more relaxed and was silent in my mind and in my thoughts. I fell asleep.

Being alone with God at the first silent retreat gave me much needed rest physically, emotionally and spiritually. I was able to exist and rest without all of the pressures of life closing in on me. I listened for the voice of God without distractions. He spoke as I stated above. I was lead to study Luke 10:38-42. This scripture really spoke to me about the eternal value of sitting at the Lord's feet. I read most of the assigned book and I was able to make several connections between my childhood experiences and my adult patterns. I cried a lot as I made these connections. The solitude, meditation, prayer, and study left me very refreshed, and I left the silent retreat with a deep sense of calming that was different than any other feeling of calm I

have ever felt in my life. All of these disciplines were beneficial to me in that they helped me to refocus, unplug from the daily grind of life and sit before the Lord for what He wanted to do and say. This was a departure from my daily prayer monologue where I did great deal of speaking and very little listening because this was what I saw and what I was taught to do as a Christian. The silence and solitude of the retreat caused me to appreciate the value of listening, especially to hear God. I experienced God's love and care in a different way. I left with a different tangible experience of God's love for me.

At the second silent retreat, I practiced the same spiritual disciplines of solitude, meditation, prayer and study. On the second retreat, I did not feel fear. Rather, I was excited to get away from the daily grind of life to spend time with God. As I began the retreat, I sat in silence and meditation. I did not time the initial period of meditation, but it was not a short period. I did not hear God say anything. I was expecting to hear something, but God shows up how He chooses to in order to change and fill us. We do not get to instruct God how to show up. We must only be open to receive Him how He chooses.

After I felt lead to begin reading the assigned retreat book, it caused me to examine myself and my Christian walk. Things that I did not think were sinful could open doors for the enemy to attack. I silently prayed and repented as I slowly went through the sections of the book thinking about the sins, I committed that I had not repented for. Some of these things seemed so innocuous but were sinful and I repented. After my prayers of repentance, I sat silently before the Lord seeking to hear from Him. He did not say anything. I felt an overwhelming feeling of peace and calm.

I studied and meditated on one of the scriptures referenced in the book at Ephesians 2:8-9. This is a scripture that I have heard preached and read many times. As I studied and

meditated on it very slowly, God began to reveal a deeper meaning of this scripture to me. In my old way of study, I would consume scripture without truly studying and meditating on it or asking God what He wanted me to learn from His word. While I got my own understanding of what the scriptures meant, I now realize that I did not always seek God for what He wanted to reveal or say to me through His word. As to Ephesians 2:8-9, my childhood pattern of perfection was works based on seeking approval from my parents. The Lord revealed to me that works do not ever trigger grace. Grace emanates from God who gives it through His lovingkindness to us by way of Jesus' sinless sacrifice. Grace extended to us by God is not deserved, merited or subject to a claim of right. Grace is given by a loving God to His creation that accepts it in faith.

I left the retreat feeling as if burdens were lifted from me because of the sin I repented for. I felt free. I left the silent retreat feeling happy. I looked at my life and my Christian walk with a deeper understanding of God's love for me. All the times I sinned, He still welcomed me back with open arms. I felt that practicing the spiritual disciplines during the retreat helped me to further move away from "me-centered" interactions with God based on my expectations. After this second retreat having been freed from sin burdens I did not realize, I left feeling I am being lead more by God in a meaningful way in my Christian walk.

In addition to the spiritual disciplines mentioned above, I have also practiced the disciplines of fasting, submission, confession, worship and service. I have not been as successful in fasting from foods as I would have liked. This is an area of growth for me. Fasting is much more than abstaining from eating food. It should be a progressive process that honors the Lord in humility. It is something that occurs in reverence for God and is only between me and God. In my few attempts to fast during this class, I became ill and I stopped. I intend to recommit myself to this discipline in a progressive way and pray more through it as I engage in this discipline.

I have also been practicing the spiritual discipline of submission. This discipline was challenging for me in that I have been trained from a small child to be very independent and do things for myself and in my own way. In practicing this discipline, I am learning the value of submitting by letting things go or not having my own way because letting things go is liberating and leads to peace. Holding on to things or holding things against people places us in bondage that causes the offense to act as an idol in our lives. (Bible, Eph. 4:32.) It does not demonstrate love. (Bible, 1 Corin. 13:4-5)

In practicing the spiritual discipline of service, I have been rewarded in the areas where I have served others. We are called to serve others in our work as if it is unto the Lord. (Bible, Colos. 3:23-24.) Service can take a number of different forms. I have experienced the spiritual discipline of serve in listening to and bearing the burden of another person and engaging in acts of service to help someone. I have learned that it is important to be lead of God in practicing this discipline because before we must be in His will as we serve others. We are not called to serve every person, just those God leads us to serve. My experience is that discernment is essential in practicing the spiritual discipline of service or burnout will be inevitable. Martha in the bible is a prime example of someone experiencing burnout because she could not discern the importance of sitting at Jesus' feet and served to a point of frustration and complaining. (Bible, Luke 10:38-42.) I am seeing the progression of being more intentional about knowing when and where to serve as lead by the Holy Spirit.

The spiritual discipline of confession is one that, in my opinion, addresses the sin of pride that can be either public and private. I say this because as a believer I have experienced an unwillingness to publicly go to the church altar for public repentance because of feelings of embarrassment, thoughts of what others might think or how I would be perceived.

Embarrassment in private have also been a stumbling block to confession. These thoughts were not from God. These thoughts are a lie of the enemy that seeks to keep us from drawing closer to God. It also keeps people in bondage to sin patterns because it does not get addressed through confession. (Bible, Matt., 10:33, 1 John 1:9.) I have been growing in this area and have been seeing freedom through practicing the spiritual discipline of confession. It has also caused me to engage in ongoing examination of myself in my Christian walk. Repentance is something I always ask as I examine myself and ask God to show me areas in my life that I must submit to Him in repentance.

The spiritual discipline of worship is one that I practice daily. I believe that my life should be lived in worship to God as well as my public expression of worship. In my mind, my worship is for an audience of one- the Triune God. In practicing this discipline, my perspective on my living has changed. I find that in worship either publicly or in private, God reveals what He would have me do and how He would have me act. My worship and praise is not based on anything unrelated to God. It is not responsive to anything going on around me. Rather, my life actions, my listening for God, speaking well of Him are intended intentional expressions of adoration to and for God. As a result, I can hear Him speaking more. This discipline has been beneficial to me. I still need to grow much in this area because I have missed opportunities to worship God in my actions because I have made mistakes in my actions, have not always listened correctly and have missed opportunities for change. I pray that the spiritual discipline of worship transforms me so that it becomes a consistent lifestyle for me.

In practicing spiritual disciplines, it has helped me to examine my spirit, thoughts, and emotions in a more intentional way. I strive through the spiritual disciplines to draw closer and closer to God, learn His will for my life more clearly, grow in faith and live the life He desires

for me to live. I am thankful to have learned about practicing spiritual disciplines to grow my faith and my walk with God.