
INTRODUCTION

DISCOVERING YOUR DESIRE



WEEK AFTER WEEK good church people come to me with their R-rated lives and a question: “Does God’s presence in me really change anything?” A woman who reads the Bible every day asks, “Why don’t I get something out of all that reading? Isn’t it supposed to help me when my husband is verbally abusive?” An overtired, busy bank officer asks, “Is spiritual dryness a permanent state?” A distressed pastor uncomfortably sits in my office and asks, “What does it mean when I’m too busy to pray?” A married couple asks why God seemed closer to them before they were married. The banker, the woman, the pastor and the couple have something in common. In the midst of busy, scattered, exhausted and hurting lives they want to experience a great love with God. Desire and desperation gnaw at their hungry souls, and they want to know if God will show up for them.

In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus said:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest.

Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly. (*The Message*)

Living “freely and lightly” can sound too good to be true. How can hectic and demanding schedules yield to the aching desire for “unforced rhythms of grace”? What good is a desire to “recover your life” if you’re plain old “burned out”?

I believe the desire for a different sort of life doesn’t appear out of thin air. The longing for something more, no matter how weak or crackling with heat, is evidence that God is already at work in your life. You wouldn’t want more of God if the Holy Spirit wasn’t first seeking you. It is the Trinity’s action within that fans the small flame of desire motivating us to “keep company” with Jesus. In fact, the very desire or desperation you feel can be God’s way of readying you to walk and work with Jesus. Take heart, transformation happens as you keep company with Jesus.

What Do You Want Jesus to Do for You?

Wanting to work with and watch Jesus is where transformation begins. Willpower and discipline *alone* can never fix your soul. Striving, pushing and trying harder will not recover your life. Unforced rhythms of grace depend on something more than self-mastery and self-effort. The simple truth is that *wanting* to keep company with Jesus has a staying power that “shoulds” and “oughts” seldom have. Jesus wants us to recognize that hidden in our desperations and desires is an appetite for the Lord and Giver of life. In fact, he says, “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat” (Matthew 5:6 *The Message*).

The very first thing Jesus asked his soon-to-be disciples was, “What do you want?” (John 1:37). Over and over again he asked about desires:

- “What is it you want?” (Matthew 20:21)
- “What do you want me to do for you?” (Matthew 20:32; Mark 10:36, 51)
- “Do you want to get well?” (John 5:6)

Jesus knew you wouldn’t get well if you didn’t *want* the responsibility that came with wellness. He also knew that the mother of James and John was clueless about the meaning of her request to have her sons be power brokers in Jesus’ kingdom (Matthew 20:21). So he pressed her to consider what her desire might mean. Jesus never attempts to shut down people’s longings; nor does he ask people to transcend their longings as some religions do. He knew human desire to be an incurable black hole of opportunity. Accompany

him and watch him welcome people who want something more:

- “A man with leprosy . . . begged [Jesus], . . . ‘If you are willing, you can make me clean.’” (Mark 1:40)
- “They pleaded with [Jesus] to leave their region.” (Matthew 8:34)
- “Save us! We’re going to drown!” (Matthew 8:25)
- “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left.” (Matthew 20:21)
- “Sir, give me this water.” (John 4:15)
- “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” (Mark 9:22)
- “The man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with [Jesus].” (Mark 5:18)
- “Lord, teach us to pray.” (Luke 11:1)

Jesus doesn’t grant requests like a genie in a bottle. He works with people, allowing their desires to draw him into the core conversations of life. For Jesus, requests for water, healing, rest, vindication, approval, status and so on all engage soul hungers. Misguided, self-destructive, true or addictive desperations and desires opened doors to relationship.

Learn from Jesus as he keeps company with people who *want something*. Watch him attend to the hole in their heart that is bigger than the galaxy. Many of his deepest interactions with people get at two things: (1) the true nature of people’s desires, and (2) a spiritual practice that helps them make space for God in their lives (in the verses below, the spiritual discipline is in quotation marks).

- Martha desperately wants Mary to help her. Jesus tells Martha to “de-

tach” from her drivenness to serve and attend to the first thing—to him (Luke 10:41-42).

- The man cured of demon possession wants to go with Jesus, but Jesus calls him to be a “witness,” knowing that telling his story to those who know him can change their lives (Mark 5:19).
- The rich young ruler wants eternal life, but he doesn’t want it enough to give his earthly wealth away. Jesus calls him to “confess” and reorder his priorities (Mark 10:21).

I love the fact that the Lord’s Prayer comes to us through a disciple’s desire to connect with God like Jesus did. “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Jesus gave the disciple a spiritual practice to *learn* and *do*. He offered him a prayer to *say*. There was no seminar on prayer. No steps and techniques for talking to God. Through praying this prayer the disciples had access to the same relationship with the heavenly Father that Jesus did.

Centuries of Connection Between Discipline and Desire

From its beginning the church linked the desire for more of God to intentional practices, relationships and experiences that gave people space in their lives to “keep company” with Jesus. These intentional practices, relationships and experiences we know as *spiritual disciplines*. The basic rhythm of disciplines (or rule) for the first believers is found in Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [a practice] and to the fellowship [relationships], to the breaking of bread [an experience] and to prayer [another practice].”

The desire to know and love God fueled these disciplines. But as the early church community ran into new situations of want, conflict, temptation and persecution, they wanted and needed help to persevere in keeping company with Jesus. The book of Acts recounts a variety of ways the first-century believers made space for God as they faced difficulties:

- Acts 3—the discipline of compassion
- Acts 4—the disciplines of witness, intercession and detachment
- Acts 7—the discipline of service
- Acts 3:1; 10:9—the discipline of fixed-hour prayer
- Acts 14:23—the discipline of fasting
- Acts 15—the discipline of discernment

It can be freeing as well as overwhelming to realize how many disciplines thread their way through the church era. As the gospel spread throughout the Roman world, the church continued to respond to people’s desires to keep company with Jesus. The *Didache*, an early Christian text, gave instruction to believers on how to grow in love of God and neighbor. It addressed disciplines like stewardship, chastity, fasting, prayer, humility and the Lord’s Supper. In the fourth and fifth centuries, as the church was relieved of its persecution, the desert fathers found that the politicized and nominal nature of Christianity sabotaged their first love. Longing to recover the passionate flame of love for God that characterized the early church, they moved into the desert where they could more intentionally partner with Jesus for transformation. Their longing to be conformed to the image of Christ gave rise to

spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, contemplation, spiritual direction, detachment and contemplation. The desert fathers' passion to love and keep company with Jesus reverberated through the secular life of Rome. Believers who shared a desire to go deep with God established communities characterized by spiritual rhythms that made space in their lives for God. These monastic communities forged their lives around disciplines of fixed-hour prayer, memorization, devotional reading, service, chastity, simplicity, hospitality, meditation and service. During this period of church growth, public worship also developed into fixed liturgies that guarded the church from heresy. These liturgies and their derivatives are still in use in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions today.

In the sixteenth century the coinciding advent of the printing press, world-class sailing ships and the Reformation fanned the flames of change. The Bible was translated from Latin into native tongues and made available to ordinary people. God's written Word could literally go to the world's end. Ministries focusing on mission outreach and service were launched by both Catholics and Protestants. Bible study, witness, stewardship, discernment and intercessory prayer became the property of common people, not just the educated elite.

The modern era ushered industrialization, individualism, psychology, ecology and global awareness into the mainstream of Western life. People began to keep company with Jesus through journaling, self-care, care of the earth, conversational prayer, accountability partners, small groups, mentoring and inner-healing prayer.

The technological age, with its peculiar

temptations and desires, is opening paths into disciplines like slowing, centering prayer and unplugging. Furthermore, classical disciplines like solitude, silence, rest, spiritual direction and retreat are resurging as people desperately seek a quiet, still center in the midst of the whirlwind.

Throughout the centuries the disciplines of prayer, confession, worship, stewardship, fellowship, service, attending to Scripture and the Lord's Supper have remained constant channels and disciplines of grace. These time-resilient disciplines give the church in every age and culture ways to keep company with Jesus. In Christ's presence, temptations, weaknesses, sin, and life's desires and desperations are addressed. It is not spiritual disciplines per se that transform us into the likeness of Christ. Without the work of God's Spirit within, practices guarantee nothing. Paul says, "Such regulations [disciplines] indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (Colossians 2:23). Disciplines done for the wrong reasons actually sabotage transformation and numb us toward God and the truth. When we use spiritual practices to gain secondary things like spiritual cachet, success, approval and respect, we rob the discipline of its God-given grace. Jesus said of the most spiritually disciplined people of his day:

These people honor me with their
lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules
taught by men. (Matthew 15:8-9)

Spiritual practices don't give us "spiritual brownie points" or help us "work the system" for a passing grade from God. They simply put us in a place where we can begin to notice God and respond to his word to us.

Spiritual disciplines give the Holy Spirit space to brood over our souls. Just as the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep at the dawn of creation, so he hovers over us today, birthing the ever-fresh Christ-life within. The Christ-in-me identity is not bound to a generic one-size-fits-all program for union with God. The Holy Spirit knows the spiritual practices, relationships and experiences that best suit our unique communion with God. He knows how to help us move into the "unforced rhythms of grace" that Jesus offers to teach us.

Spiritual transformation, "recovering your life," comes from partnering with the Trinity for change. That doesn't mean we give the Holy Spirit an agenda or a demand. We simply *desire*. We bring our ache for change, our longing for belonging, our desperation to make a difference. Then we keep company with Jesus by making space for him through a spiritual discipline. Our part is to offer ourselves lovingly and obediently to God. God then works within us doing what he alone can do. Our desires don't obligate the holy One. God is free to come to us in spiritual disciplines as he wills, not as we demand. But unless we open ourselves to him through spiritual practices, we will miss his coming altogether.

Keeping company with Jesus in the space between wanting to change and not being able to change through effort alone can be a difficult thing to do. Desiring God and not demanding an outcome keeps us

in the risky place of waiting and longing. The truth is that we do not know how God intends to conform us to the image of his Son. God's Spirit of truth may use our spiritual practice to reveal false self-conceptions and idols of our heart. Becoming aware of what is true and false about us is essential for spiritual growth, and it is not always comfortable. So when we find ourselves in the space between desire and demand, when we are waiting on God and nothing seems to be happening, we must remember this space is an opportunity. In the unfixables of our lives we are invited to keep company with Jesus and take a risk that God's intentions toward us are good. Day after day this is what Jesus did. It is called trust. He calls us: "Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly" (Matthew 11:30 *The Message*).

Spiritual Disciplines Open Us to God

I believe the root of all desire stems from our innate need to open our lives to God in worship. Consequently, I have chosen to catalog spiritual disciplines in accordance with the acronym WORSHIP. But there are many other ways of getting your hands around the disciplines. Richard Foster divides the disciplines into inward, outward and corporate. *Inward* disciplines are practiced in the privacy of our intimate walk with Jesus. *Outward* disciplines affect how we interface with the world. And *corporate* disciplines are practiced with others. Dallas Willard distinguishes between disciplines of engagement and disciplines of abstinence. Disciplines of *engagement* connect us to the needs of others and the call to be God's heart and hands in this world. They address sins of commission. Disci-

plines of *abstinence* detach us from hurry, clutter and busyness, and open us to being with God alone. They remind us that we are human *beings*, not human *doings*, and that God is more concerned with who we become than what we accomplish. They address sins of omission.

Worship is not something we work up or go to on Sunday morning. Worship is *every* discipline's end game! We miss the point and endanger our souls when we think of spiritual disciplines as ends in themselves. Spiritual practices exist to open us into God. They are never the "be all and end all" of discipleship. The "be all and end all" is a loving trust of and obedience to the God who is within us yet beyond us and our very best efforts.

In worship we live into the reality that the first and best thing in life is nothing less than a transforming relationship with the God who made us, named us and called into being. Worship ignites and attaches us to this truest and best-of-all desire—the desire to let God have his way with us. There is nothing more valuable, nothing more desirable, nothing more worthwhile and nothing more wondrous than the divine life of the holy Three. From the beginning we were designed to be part of their divine community. We are not soul freelancers, but beings created to dance in the arms of the Trinity. And our worship is always a response to the Trinity's unchanging ardor and desire for us. Spiritual disciplines that do not help us partner with the Trinity in worship are "empty worthless acts and a perfect waste of time."

Disciplines are intentional ways we open space in our lives for the worship of

God. They are not harsh but grace-filled ways of responding to the presence of Christ with our bodies. Worship happens in our bodies, not just our heads. Paul writes in Romans 12:1, "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

Offering our bodies to God lands us smack in the middle of our weakness and limits. We don't have unlimited energy, time and personal resources. We are finite. We need to be realistic about what our body can do and sustain. Burning the candle at both ends can burn out the soul as well as the body. Spiritual disciplines are ways we give our bodies to unhurried rhythms of grace. They are ways we unhurry our souls before God. It is important to remember that we are not meant to do all the practices at once.

Following Desire to a Discipline

Each letter of the word *worship* points us toward a particular way of creating space for God in our lives. Within each letter you can find particular spiritual disciplines that stem from your God-given desires. Listen to your desires and desperations. Your desires may reflect

- your needs
- an area of struggle
- desperation
- barrenness in routines or relationships
- concern with lack of motivation and what is not working in your life

Ask yourself, *How do I want to or need to be with God?* Circle the letter in WORSHIP that most catches your attention.

Worship God
Open myself to God
Relinquish the false self and idols
 of my heart
Share my life with others
Hear the word of God
Incarnate Christ's love for the world
Pray to God

(If you are not particularly intuitive or find self-reflection on your desires difficult, consider using the Spiritual Health Planner in appendix 1.)

Once you have chosen a particular letter, turn to the list of spiritual disciplines and desires at the front of the book (pp. 11-13) and slowly read through the desires in your chosen category. Which desire catches you? Make a mark beside the corresponding discipline. Remember, you are not choosing a spiritual discipline all on your own or in a vacuum. The Holy Spirit is at work in you stirring up your desire. Because *reading* about spiritual disciplines can be a great deal easier than *practicing* them, don't spend lots of time reading *every* discipline in the category you chose. Mastery of every discipline is not the goal. Surrendering to God is. Follow your desire to the Trinity. At times you may notice that you are off track and have lost your way. You may find you

- compare yourself to others
- think you are further along than you really are
- turn a spiritual discipline into a legalistic requirement
- substitute the means for the end

Do not berate yourself. The Holy Spirit is helping you recognize how you still try to fix your spiritual life by yourself. Be thankful for

what you see, and gently return to God and begin again. The spiritual journey is made in small incremental steps. We rise and we fall and we rise again. Remember the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* won't make you disciplined, fix your spiritual life or force something to happen in your soul. A book can never make God appear on demand. But this book can give you a way of following your heart's desire into the arms of God. Let it help you keep company with Jesus through disciplines that give God room to work in your relationships, attitudes, appetites and nature. As you intentionally embrace disciplines that conform you to the image of Christ, you will find that you can learn to live like Jesus did—"freely and lightly." Ronald Rolheiser, in his book *The Shattered Lantern*, says, "Freedom is always experienced in relationship to some lord."

Remember, the discipline you are being called to needs to fit with your life now. It must work within the givens of your human limits. If after reading about your discipline it seems impossible, check out the appendix "Seasons, Stages and Ages of Transformation."

Practice in Community

My life has been shaped by men and women who loved me and handed me something of God in their very human lives. Their spiritual practices were woven into the fabric of their lives on the loom of relationships—both with God and with me. They had no halos. They told me the truth about their good, bad and ugly while passing on the lore of the spiritual terrain they had traversed. I believe this is the way spiritual disciplines are to be learned. We are to learn them in relationships.

For the sake of brevity, this handbook often leaves the stories and relationships surrounding spiritual disciplines for another to tell. For me all these disciplines come with faces and names and times and places. It is my prayer that these thumbnail sketches of spiritual practices will open you to the breathtaking and inexhaustible world of relationship—relationship with God, others and even yourself. Let these disciplines draw you deeper into your life and the people you live and work with. Let them reveal the human, authentic, God-given truth of you that we all long to see.

How to Use the Disciplines Catalog— a Journey, Not a Fix

For those of you with an antipathy to reading a book cover to cover—relax. This is *not* a book you read from beginning to end. In fact, it's probably a bad idea to try. The *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* is like a compass that gives you your bearings. It provides you with ways of responding to Jesus, the pole star of the soul. Once you figure out how to navigate the material, you can find your way forward from any point on the spiritual journey.

Many of the disciplines found in this book can be practiced alone or in community. Feel free to experiment with the discipline in both contexts. Some of the disciplines could easily be in more than one category. For the sake of simplicity they appear only once. Other disciplines, like community, small groups, retreat, intercession and contemplative prayer, are container disciplines for a number of other disciplines that appear in this book. If you are looking for a particular discipline, be sure to check the index.

Which letter of WORSHIP best matches your longings or hungers or desperations?

- Set aside fifteen or twenty minutes to orient yourself to the disciplines in this letter.
 - Scan the desires preceding the spiritual disciplines. Which ones resonate with your longing?
 - Note the fruit of the discipline at the bottom of the chart. Which of these transformative changes resonate with your desire to become more like Jesus?
 - Read the short description of the disciplines that intrigue you, and choose your practice based on what best suits your life situation now.
1. Set aside twenty minutes for the practice of your chosen discipline. (Some disciplines cannot be done in a twenty-minute time slot, but twenty minutes is a good starting point for many of them.)
 2. Pray a short prayer of dedication, such as, "Here I am, Lord. I want to be with you. Open me up." Express your desire to be with God.
 - Unhurriedly read the Scripture preceding your discipline. Let it settle into your heart. You may want to copy it out and place it somewhere your eyes normally land in the course of a day.
 - Turn to the desire at the top of the chart. Thank the Lord for giving you the fuel of desire. Offer your desire and your body to Jesus. Acknowledge that while the desire does not entitle you or obligate God, you are open to take the path desire has opened before you.

3. Follow the guidelines for the practice. Respond to any invitation you sense from the Holy Spirit. Don't hurry. You can pick up where you left off on another day.

- The reflection questions offer you ways of searching your heart in the presence of Christ. The questions take your spiritual pulse and enable you to explore resistance you may feel, past experiences—positive and negative—that might affect your practice of the discipline or areas of confusion that might bog you down. You may find some of the questions make you feel uncomfortable; remember Jesus' words to his disciples in John 16:12: "I still have many things to tell you, but you can't handle them now. But when the Friend comes, the Spirit of Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is" (*The Message*). The more intentionally open we are to the truth about ourselves, the more authentic our dialogue with the Trinity can be.

You are not wasting time by answering the reflection questions. John Calvin wrote in *The Institutes*: "Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." Our partnership with the Holy Spirit is the linchpin of the transformation process.

You do not need to take the questions in order or do more than one at a time. Take your time with them, listening deeply to the Spirit and to what your life wants to tell you. If you process your thoughts well

on paper, journal your response. If you think best when you walk, then go for a walk. You may find that when you return to the same question at a later time, the Holy Spirit has taken you to a deeper place of self-awareness so the dialogue with God can deepen even more.

- The spiritual exercises provide hands-on ways to begin practicing the discipline. Read through the exercises, choosing one that is possible for you at this time. Don't try to do a different exercise every day. You can stay with one exercise for as long as you want. When you are ready to begin a spiritual exercise:
4. Set aside the last five minutes to respond to God in prayer. Tell God what it was like for you to practice the spiritual discipline. Express your thoughts and feelings freely. Gratitude, anger, frustration, impatience—bring it all to God. Ask the Holy Spirit to seal in your memory what you need to remember.
 5. Take one word or thought with you into the rest of your day. Returning to this word over time develops soul reflexes of attention to God. The practice of noticing God throughout our day shapes the way we live and interact with others.
 6. Offer yourself to God and place yourself in his hands for the remainder of your day.

The *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* invites you to journey with Jesus into the God-given desires within you, to "learn the unforced rhythms of grace." It is my prayer that Jesus will give you a way of keeping company with him that opens you wide to God.