

Introduction

WELCOME TO THE WILD AND WONDERFUL world of spiritual formation using the spiritual disciplines!

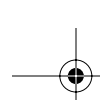
Spiritual formation simply means developing the holy habits of the Christian faith. These habits are also referred to as the spiritual disciplines. Habits are important because they are the things that carry us through life in all of its seasons. We do certain things every day—like brushing our teeth or combing our hair—regardless of what mood we are in. Often we do them without conscious thought because they are so ingrained in us. We do them because we know they are important and we usually feel better for having done them.

The word *discipline* often sends up red flags for people. They are afraid it can only refer to some joyless routine of drudgery that will add yet another burden to their already full schedule. They don't understand that the spiritual disciplines are meant to lead us to a joyful, rich life like the one Jesus modeled. In fact, if these disciplines don't lead us to joy and goodness, and to show more mercy toward ourselves and others, we need to stop doing them immediately! Legalism is never a reflection of the life Jesus lived and invites us to live.

The word *disciple* comes from the same root word that *discipline* comes from. In learning the spiritual disciplines, we are seeking to become better disciples of Jesus Christ. We are not trying to earn our way into God's favor, but rather we are trying to develop habits that will make us better at living the life Jesus wants for us.

Look at it this way: in any relationship there must be active engagement on both sides. Each person in the relationship needs to respond to the other person appropriately, to anticipate needs and wants and to be sensitive and





encouraging to the other person. This analogy breaks down, however, when we are talking about a relationship with the Creator of the universe. God is always the initiator, but at some point we must respond to the goodness and grace God offers us if we consider ourselves believers. We always fail miserably in our part of the relationship, but we are offered forgiveness and a chance to learn a new way whenever we ask God for that opportunity.

This is where the spiritual disciplines come in. These habits, or tools, teach us to respond to God and to the people around us in ways that look more like the ways Jesus responded during his life on earth. But if the spiritual disciplines should ever become sources of pride or legalism, we must discontinue them immediately.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In this book we will explore simple ways for Christians of all ages to develop holy habits through the use of the spiritual disciplines. I am deeply indebted to the groundbreaking work of Richard J. Foster in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, where he outlines twelve classical spiritual practices that Christians in all times and places have routinely engaged in. We will focus on one of these twelve disciplines for each month of the year.

Within each discipline, there is an introductory chapter and twenty daily readings that can be used within that month. Each introduction contains a list of suggested activities to help you practice that discipline. Choose only one or two each week—whatever seems appropriate for your schedule. The exercises can be used by small groups or individuals, at home or at camp, in a Christian day school or adult Sunday school class, in confirmation classes or at a youth group meeting. There are only five readings for each week because I want to encourage you to take a reflective pace in studying and acquiring the habit of that particular discipline. The structure of this book is meant to increase the goodness of your daily life, not burden it.

You do not have to go straight through this book. While you can work with the material from beginning to end, you can also turn to a discipline that feels more familiar or interesting to you and start there. Eventually, though, you should engage with all of the spiritual disciplines presented in this book so that you maintain a balanced understanding of these holy habits. And do spend the full month with each discipline once you choose one





to focus on. It may take several days to begin to understand what that particular discipline is trying to teach.

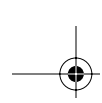
A gentle word of caution: sometimes the disciplines we like studying the least are the ones we need the most. The good news is that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide you to the right place to start, and he will gently move you through the disciplines in the order that is best for you.

These disciplines are not meant to be one more thing for us to fail at in our relationship with God. They are meant to help us untie knots of bondage and break old, bad habits that make life more difficult. The disciplines are meant to breathe life into the dead places of our souls.

Your children can learn these disciplines right along with you. You can help them develop spiritual habits just as you do with physical, nutritional and educational habits. Here are some suggestions for getting started:

- Make sure you have a good idea of what the discipline is and how it can help make you a better disciple of Jesus Christ. You do not have to be an expert (no one in this lifetime will ever fully master all of these disciplines!), but you should be reasonably familiar with it before you try to teach it.
- For younger children, teach by doing. Engage in the activities suggested for children, and during the activity talk about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Much of this can be done as a normal part of your day, for spiritual formation happens in the “everydayness” of our lives.
- For older children, it might be helpful to have a family devotion time once a week (every Sunday evening, for example) to talk about the discipline you are focusing on for the month. Then as a family choose an activity or two to practice that week. Again, try as much as possible to make the activity a part of your everyday life.
- Let adolescents choose their own activity. This will help them take more responsibility for their own spiritual formation, something they will be doing soon enough as they move through high school and into the world of higher education or career.
- Most of all, love your children, encourage them and support them in their growing relationship with God. Remember, your child’s relationship with God will not be the same as yours, so try not to get in between your child and her encounters with the living Christ.





Each month you will find a few ideas highlighted that are especially appropriate to do with children.

And so, with a prayer for God's help and blessing, I invite you to a deeper level of discipleship, a level that leads to more joy and goodness. My prayer is that at the end of twelve months, you will have more holy habits at your disposal as you seek to be a more faithful, more joyful disciple of Jesus Christ.

