



Spiritual Disciplines for Leaders

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How to Use This Resource

Spiritual disciplines put us in a posture that invites God to speak into our lives. They have the power to change our perspective, heighten our senses, and reveal our weaknesses. Spiritual disciplines place us at Jesus' feet and allow him to pour into us, mending our broken hearts. That's why they're great to incorporate into small groups. But they're also perfect for leaders to practice on their own or with other leaders for accountability. After all, leaders need to cultivate a growing relationship with Christ in order to effectively minister to others.

Overview

These articles will help you better understand what spiritual disciplines can do for you as a leader. You'll also learn the warning signs for leaders who may not be cultivating a growing relationship with Christ.

Specific Disciplines

These articles will explain several different disciplines and how you might incorporate them into your life. You'll learn about fasting, confession, self-examination, journaling, discernment, and more.

— *Amy Jackson is Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com.*

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Finding a Steady Rhythm

The not-so-secret key to effective ministry and leadership

Ruth Haley Barton

As church leaders, most of us know only one speed: full steam ahead. And we have been stuck in that speed for a very long time. If we do not establish saner rhythms in our own lives—life patterns that curb our unbridled activism and calm our compulsive busyness—we will not make it over the long haul. And neither will the people we are leading!

Work Hard, Rest Faithfully

In Mark 6, Jesus commissioned the disciples for ministry and gave them the authority to cast out demons, to preach the gospel, and to heal the sick. They went off on their first ministry excursion and returned all excited about their newfound power and influence. They crowded around Jesus to report all they had done.

But what did Jesus do? He didn't seem to have much time for their ministry reports. Immediately he instructed them "to come away with me and rest awhile." He seemed more concerned about helping them establish a rhythm that would sustain them in ministry rather than allowing them to be overly enamored by ministry success, which can lead to a compulsion to do more and more without ceasing.

When we keep pushing forward without taking adequate time for rest, our way of life may seem heroic, but there is frenetic quality to our work. It may lack true effectiveness because we lose the ability to be fully present—present to God and present to other people. And we lose the ability to discern what is really needed in our situation.

The result can be "sloppy desperation," a mental and spiritual state in which we're just trying to get it all done. And this prevents us from the quality of presence that delivers true insight and spiritual leadership.

When we are depleted, we become overly reliant on clamoring voices outside of us for direction. We react to symptoms rather than seeking to understand and respond to underlying causes. We rely on other people's ministry models because we are too tired to listen and observe our setting and craft something uniquely suited for this place. When we are rested, we bring steady, alert attention to our leadership and are characterized by discernment of what is truly needed in our situation. And we have the energy and creativity to carry it out.

Rhythms of Engagement and Retreat

One of the most important rhythms for those of us in ministry to establish is a constant back-and-forth motion between engagement and retreat. We need regular times to engage in the battle, giving our best energy to the task. Then we need regular times when we step back to gain perspective, re-strategize, and tend our wounds—an inevitability of life in ministry.

An occupational hazard for us in Christian ministry is that it can be hard to distinguish between the times we are “on,” working *for* God, and times when we can just *be with* God to replenish our own soul. Our time with Scripture can be reduced to a textbook or a tool for ministry rather than an intimate communication from God to us personally. Even prayer can become an exhausting round of different kinds of mental activity, or a public display of our spiritual prowess.

Times of extended retreat give us a chance to come home to God’s presence and to be open with God, in utter privacy, about what is true of us. This is important for us and for those we serve. When we repress what is real in our lives and just keep soldiering on, we get weary from holding it in and eventually it leaks out in ways that are damaging to ourselves and to others.

But on retreat there is time and space to attend to what is real in our own lives—to celebrate the joys, grieve the losses, shed tears, sit with our questions, feel our anger, attend to our loneliness—and allow God to be with us in those places. These are not times for problem solving, because not everything can be fixed or solved. On retreat we rest in God and wait on him to do what is needed, and we return to the battle with fresh energy and keener insight.

Silence and Word

“In the multitude of words there is much transgression,” the Scriptures say. This is a truth that can drive us ministry folks to despair given the incessant flow of words we feel compelled to issue from our mouths, pens, and computers. Those of us who deal in words are at great risk of misusing them and even sinning with our words due to the sheer volume of them!

In silence, our speech patterns are refined because silence fosters a self-awareness that enables us to choose more truly the words that we say. Rather than speech that issues from our subconscious needs to impress, to put others in their place, to compete, to control, to manipulate, or to put a good spin on things, we are able to notice our inner dynamics and make choices that are more grounded in love, trust, and God-given wisdom.

The Psalmist says, “When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your bed and be silent. Offer right sacrifices (in other words, stay faithful to your spiritual practices) and put your trust in the Lord.” At times the most heroic thing you, as leader, can do is to remain in that private place with God for as long as it takes to consciously trust yourself to God rather than to everything else you could be doing in the moment.

Stillness and Action

Buried deep in the psyche of many leaders is a Superman mentality—that somehow we are not like other human beings, and we can function beyond normal human limitations and save the world. Or at least our little corner of the world. This is a myth that we indulge to our own peril.

Sabbath-keeping is the primary discipline that helps us live within the limits of our humanity and honor God as our Creator. It is the key to a life lived in sync with the rhythms that God himself built into our world. Yet it is the discipline that seems hardest for us to live.

Sabbath keeping honors the body's need for rest, the spirit's need for replenishment, and the soul's need to delight itself in God for God's own sake. It begins with the willingness to acknowledge the limits of our humanness and then to take steps to begin to live more graciously within the order of things.

Sabbath keeping may be the most challenging rhythm for leaders to establish because Sunday, in most churches, has become a day of Christian busyness—perhaps the busiest! And, of course, the busiest person on that day is church leaders!

This just means that leaders need to set aside another day for their Sabbath. Or they might consider ordering their church's life so that everyone learns how to practice Sabbath. It could begin with worship, but then everyone goes home and rests and delights for the rest of the day because there are no other church activities. In that way, the pastor's commitment to Sabbath becomes a blessing for everyone.

There is a freedom that comes from being who we are in God and resting into God. This eventually enables us to bring something truer to the world than all of our striving. Sabbath keeping helps us live within our limits because on the Sabbath, in so many different ways, we allow ourselves to be the creature in the presence of our Creator. We touch something more real than what we are able produce on our own. We touch our very being in God.

Surely that is what the people around us need most.

—Ruth Haley Barton is the founder of *The Transforming Center*. This article is adapted from *Leadership Journal*; copyright 2007 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What factors are driving the busyness in your life right now?
2. When was the last time you practiced the disciplines of silence and solitude? What was the result?
3. Which of the rhythms above do you practice best? In which rhythm do you need the most improvement?

Spiritual Disciplines for Church Leaders

It's important to nurture spiritual disciplines unconnected to ministry.

Lynne M. Baab

Jon and Colin play vigorous racquetball every Wednesday and Friday at lunch. Every few weekends, they take time to talk and relax together. They have learned that their relationship doesn't grow without spending time simply enjoying each other's company. They have found a balance point between being friends for the purpose of playing racquetball together and being friends who simply have affection for each other.

This balance point that Jon and Colin have found reflects a tension in friendship that researchers call *affection versus instrumentality*. In what ways is a friendship an end in itself, characterized by affection and simple enjoyment of another person? And in what ways is that friendship instrumental—a means to another end, such as playing sports or engaging in a hobby with another person? Most friendships have elements of both.

This tension provides a thought-provoking framework for those of us in Christian ministry to consider our relationship with God. How much do we engage in spiritual disciplines or practices because we long to grow closer to God as an end in itself? How much do we engage in those disciplines as a means to another end?

Because we are partners with God in ministry, it's completely right and good for Christian leaders to engage in spiritual disciplines that have a purpose beyond ourselves. This includes praying for the people with whom we minister and studying the Bible to prepare for preaching or teaching. Yet these practices have a component of instrumentality. They are not focused on simply enjoying the presence of God and growing closer in intimate friendship with Jesus Christ. As humans, we need God in many ways in our lives, so our relationship with God will always have aspects of instrumentality.

The people of Israel and the followers of Jesus throughout the ages also spent time in God's presence simply enjoying the wonder of God's goodness. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty," says the Psalmist. "My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God" (Psalm 84:1, 2). Jesus encouraged his disciples to abide in him and also to enjoy friendship with him (John 15). Countless other Scriptures testify to how precious it is to draw near to God.

In order to maintain spiritual health, every person in ministry needs to engage in a few spiritual disciplines that nurture relationship with God as an end in itself. In conversations with other pastors and congregational leaders, I've identified several reasons why this is true.

To Appreciate All Aspects of Life

First, we need to remember that the whole of our life matters to God, not just our ministry. We so easily get caught up in what we are doing, and our identity shifts away from being a

child of God to being a pastor, staff member, or other kind of minister. When we engage in spiritual disciplines that have no obvious function related to our ministry, we nurture our identity as God's beloved children.

Anna, a musician who has led the praise band at her church for many years, has practiced fasting both from food and from things other than food. One year she felt led by God to stop playing the guitar for Lent, a form of fasting she had never experienced before. She had to bow out of the worship leadership for several events as well as Sunday worship for that period of time.

The first Sunday she attended the worship service without a role in leading music, she found herself criticizing several aspects of the music. God spoke to her clearly that morning, saying, "If you can't worship me for who I am, we have a problem." As the weeks passed, she came to understand that her absorption in playing music had blinded her to other aspects of worship, particularly intercessory prayer. During and after the guitar fast, she has engaged in intercessory prayer in new and fruitful ways. This new pattern of prayer reminded her that God cares about her whole self, not just her musical side.

While God called Anna to fast from something related to her ministry, God can also call us to fast in a way that simply helps us clear away the clutter and draw near. Fasting helps us realize our dependence on God for everything in life. It nurtures thankfulness, and often confronts us with our addiction to comfort. While God may call us to fast and pray for ministry needs, fasting can also be an excellent spiritual discipline to help us rest in God and rejoice that God loves us and cares for us, quite apart from what we do.

To Maintain a Sense of Self

We need to nurture an inner life that is not related to our ministry so we can move on to other jobs or into retirement and still have a sense of self apart from our ministry. Anna could lose her voice and get crippling arthritis in her hands, and she would still be able to pray. That statement would have been true for her in a theoretical way before her guitar fast, but now she knows it is true in a deep and powerful way.

To Hear God's Voice

We need to hear God's voice about our lives beyond our ministry. The spiritual discipline of discernment is deeply significant for those in Christian leadership. We need to grow in our ability to hear God's guidance for directions for ministry, particularly in these rapidly changing times. But the discipline of discernment is also significant for areas of our lives beyond our ministry. Are there new ways I could show love to the people in my life? Is God calling me to care for my body or the environment differently than I am now? How is God calling me to use my time when I'm not working? In what ways is God calling me to grow in prayer?

To Deepen Nonprofessional Relationships

We need to nurture a devotional life that is not related to our ministry so that we can be spiritual partners with our spouses, other family members, and friends. The people in our lives who are not involved in professional ministry roles are engaged in various forms of service and ministry in the world. They rely on God for love, strength, and guidance for all the areas of their lives.

If our devotional lives are centered on our work, we run the risk of making it seem like our lives are in a different category from others'. This damages our relationships with those we love, and it also damages our perception of ourselves. All of us, first and foremost, are human beings created in God's image, redeemed by Jesus Christ to be God's beloved adopted children. Spiritual disciplines that help us draw near to God in pure affection enable us to remember our humanity and our solidarity with others in every walk of life.

The spiritual discipline of confession can be helpful here. When I am honest about how short I fall from God's desires for me, and when I receive God's forgiveness, I am restored to a position of beloved child. I am no different than any other person who needs and receives forgiveness. In that position, I can be a spiritual partner with those people in my life whose jobs don't revolve around Christian ministry, like mine does.

To Provide a Positive Example

We need to retain our enthusiasm for the things of God in order to be effective ministers. And we need to model a lively Christian faith. These are good reasons to develop spiritual disciplines that are separate from our ministry responsibilities. Yet these reasons are in themselves instrumental because they help us meet a ministry goal rather than nurturing a relationship with God as an end in itself.

And that is one of the perils of Christian ministry. This wonderful thing we are called to—an intimate relationship with God from which ministry grows and flows—is itself a part of what we are called to model for others. This can be a recipe for hubris and self-importance. And the pull of pride is yet one more reason to develop and practice spiritual disciplines that have no connection with our ministry. These disciplines and practices can help us learn to live as beloved children of God—in the midst of our calling to lead and serve others in their journey of growing into Christ's likeness.

I can picture saints from ages past reading this article, and I imagine they would say that all the reasons I've given here are instrumental, and that God invites us to draw near simply because God is so good. Full stop. No other reason. And they would be absolutely right. "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations" (Psalm 90:1). "How great is the love that God has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1).

— Lynne M. Baab is a Presbyterian minister and the author of [Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond our Appetites](#) and [Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest](#); copyright 2008 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What spiritual disciplines do I practice on a regular basis?
2. Of those disciplines, which are directly related to my ministry role?
3. What are some disciplines I could practice that are separated from my ministry? What do I need to do to begin practicing them?

Warning Signs for Leaders

Learn how to tell when it's time to take a step back and refocus.

Maxie Dunham

Just as marriage can both enhance and detract from the romantic passion between a man and woman, so the pastoral role is both a boon and a bane to spirituality. We are wise to be alert to its possibilities, because being a church leader hinders closeness to God in several ways:

Busyness. Church administrative tasks and constant interaction with people—all to keep an organization humming—take time, attention, and enormous amounts of energy. That often leaves us little concentrated time with God. If we do attend to the spiritual disciplines in such a ministry, we often do so less because we desire closeness with God and more because we are supposed to. It's our job, all duty and no delight.

The professional side to ministry. Church leaders, in order to do their jobs well, need to learn certain professional skills: how to conduct meetings, how to be diplomatic in all kinds of situations, how to juggle family and ministry, how and when to take community responsibilities. You may also have classes to attain an advanced degree or denominational relationships to build, depending on your context. In the process of jumping through all the hoops toward becoming a "professional," though, we may begin losing our passion for prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Scheduling freedom. Church leaders, more than most professionals, have the ability to set their own schedules. In some church settings, if we are content to do so, we can cover the required bases without working especially hard. Pastoral ministry can be the most demanding work or the most cushy work on earth, depending on what we make of it.

Lots of affirmation. When we do our jobs well, especially when we respond with compassion to our people, they will affirm us lavishly. But the amazing thing is we often don't have to do well for people to praise us. No matter how poorly we do, in fact, there are always some kindhearted souls in the congregation who will tell us we're doing great. Whether the praise is due or not, if we hear enough of it, we may assume that we're God's person—that all is well with us, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Regular contact with the sacred. Whether it's leading a small group or preaching a sermon, opening a meeting in prayer or closing worship with a benediction, baptizing people or serving communion, we're constantly handling holy things. But continual absorption in spiritual things breeds a dullness toward the sacred.

Evidence of a Distance Problem

If feeling close to God is not a sure indicator of one's closeness, neither is a feeling of distance to be equated with a poor relationship with God. So I must have some other signs that signal how I am doing with God. Here are a few I find helpful:

I have no heart for ministry. This is key for me. In fact, I'm more concerned about losing my appetite for ministry than I am about burnout. That's because loss of heart can be so spiritually deceptive. A leader who has lost his or her appetite functions in the system, performs well in the local church, does everything required with finesse and professional skill, and succeeds at keeping the church going—but there's no excitement.

I feel depressed about my spirituality for a significant period of time. Recently I was confronted with a major decision about the course of my ministry. Although I spent extended time daily in prayer and Scripture reading, for two months I was unable to sense any direction from God. I finally got to the point where I was simply numb, unable to progress in my thinking about the decision. I knew then that something was wrong.

My decisions are not thought through. In this regard, my wife serves as a barometer of my relationship with God. She has an uncanny way of asking the questions that show that I've not given enough thought and prayer to a decision. She also shows me how I take a simple decision and complicate it, sometimes because I'm seeking to evade God's way of doing something. Do you have someone who can help you in this way?

My emotions are off base and inappropriate. I've discovered that the way I respond to calls can be a signal of my spiritual state. When I begin thinking, *Oh no, another phone call*, or start procrastinating getting back to people, it's time to stop and assess what's going on. It's likely that I no longer have the spiritual resources to meet the demands of my calling.

I have a chronic problem with sleeplessness. Sometimes sleeplessness is of God. I have been awakened by God to receive some message that I haven't received during my working day. Some of my most meaningful times of prayer and spiritual reflection have come in the early hours of the morning. But chronic sleeplessness is often a sign that I'm not only overworked, but also working on my own steam, not depending on God's power.

Getting Closer

I have found six things especially helpful in keeping me close to God if they're helpful for you:

- 1. Attend to the emotional.** Getting my emotions straightened out through a professional counselor and a therapy group really helped me spiritually. I was able, for instance, to accept God's acceptance of me, despite my background, and that freed me to start using the gifts I did have for his service.

2. **Practice spiritual disciplines.** As you draw near to God, you will be refreshed. Find one or more disciplines that help you connect with God in meaningful ways.
3. **Retreats.** I schedule two personal retreats a year as regular maintenance for my soul: one around my birthday, and another about six months later. In addition, I sometimes need an unscheduled time away to break through a prolonged dry period. Short day-long retreats are usually sufficient.
4. **Practice the presence.** When I don't feel God's presence, I've learned the importance of practicing God's presence. For me this most often means sharing God's presence—his love and goodness—with someone else. John Wesley encouraged Christians to practice acts of mercy partly because, in many ways, we act our way into Christlikeness more than we pray, study, or worship our way into Christlikeness.
5. **Stretch yourself.** After preaching and administrating a church for a few years, I face the danger of feeling that I'm in control—that I can, through mere technique, bring about effectiveness and success. To counteract that, I welcome ministries that push me out of my control zone.
6. **Nurture relationships.** John Wesley used the term *conferencing* to describe intentional reflection and sharing with others about what God is doing in your life. Two questions I find helpful when meeting with others are: 1) When this week did you feel closest to God? and 2) When did you have a discipleship opportunity, the chance to experience growth yourself or help others grow, but ignored it? The first question leads to a greater awareness of our experience and relationship with God, and the second sensitizes us to opportunities for growth.

—Maxie Dunham. This article is excerpted from *Mastering Personal Growth*; copyright Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Are my ministry responsibilities dulling my passion for God? When was the last time I checked?
2. When have I felt most distant from God? What were the symptoms?
3. Which of the above practices for becoming closer to God seem most appealing to me?

The Benefits and Practice of Solitude

Keep your clock ticking with these exercises.

John Ortberg

Dallas Willard noted an experiment done with mice a few years ago. A researcher found that when amphetamines are given to a mouse in solitude, it takes a high dosage to kill it. Give it to a group of mice, and they start hopping around and hyping each other up so much that a fraction of the dosage will be lethal—so great is the effect of “the world” on mice. In fact, a mouse given no amphetamines at all, placed in a group on the drug, will get so hyper that in 10 minutes or so it will be dead. “In groups,” Willard noted, “they go off like popcorn.”

You’d think only mice would be so foolish as to hang out with other mice that are so hopped up—so frantically pursuing mindless activity for no discernible purpose—that they put their own lives at risk.

What Exactly Is Solitude?

Some people ask, “What do I do when I practice solitude? What should I bring with me?” The primary answer, of course, is—nothing.

At its heart, solitude is primarily about not doing something. Just as fasting means to refrain from eating, so solitude means to refrain from society. When I go into solitude, I withdraw from conversation, from others, from noise, from media, from the constant barrage of stimulation.

“In solitude,” Henri Nouwen wrote, “I get rid of my scaffolding.” Scaffolding is all the stuff I use to keep myself propped up, to convince myself I’m important or okay. In solitude I have no friends to talk with, no phone calls or meetings, no TV to entertain, no music or books or newspapers to occupy and distract my mind. I am, in the words of the old hymn, “Just as I Am”—just me and my sinfulness, and God.

Two Types of Solitude

I think about solitude in two categories. First, I need brief periods of solitude on a regular basis—preferably each day, even at intervals during the day. But I also need extended periods of solitude—a half day, a day, or a few days—and this is possible only at greater intervals.

Frances de Sales, author of the classic *An Introduction to the Devout Life*, used the image of a clock:

There is no clock, no matter how good it may be, that doesn’t need resetting and rewinding twice a day—once in the morning and once in the evening. In addition, at least once a year it must be taken apart to remove the dirt clogging it, straighten out bent parts, and repair those worn out. In like manner, every morning and evening a man who really takes care of his heart must rewind it for God’s service.... At least once a year, he

must take it apart and examine every piece in detail—that is, every affection and passion—in order to repair whatever defects there may be.

I try to begin my days by praying over the day's schedule—meetings I'll attend, tasks I must perform, people I'll be with—and placing them all in God's hands. Through the day, I try to take 5-minute breaks, close the door to my office, and remind myself that one day the office will be gone and I'll still belong to God.

At the end of the day, I like to review the day with God—to go over the events to see what he might be saying to me through them, and to hand any anxieties or regrets over to him. One of the great benefits of this exercise is that you begin to learn from your days.

When I was in athletics in school, we used to watch videotapes of our performances. They were sometimes painful to watch, but it was worth it to be spared from making the same mistakes over and over. It's the same here. For instance, when I began this daily review, I discovered I experienced much more anger than I ever thought. I began to be aware of the attitudes and responses that were guiding my life.

I also need extended times alone. One of the great obstacles you will likely face is that extended solitude will feel like a waste of time. We're so conditioned to feel our existence is justified only when we are accomplishing something. But also, for me, this feeling comes because my mind wanders so much. I used to think if I devoted a large chunk of time to praying, I should be able to engage in solid, uninterrupted, focused prayer. But I can't.

What I have come to realize, slowly, is that bits of focused prayer interspersed with these wanderings is all my mind is capable of right now. One day I hope to do better. But for now, I have to accept that a large chunk of prayer time will be lost to wandering. Brother Lawrence said it like this: "For many years I was bothered by the thought that I was a failure at prayer. Then one day I realized I would always be a failure at prayer, and I've gotten along much better ever since."

How to Spend a Day Alone

I was intimidated the first time I tried spending an entire day in solitude. Putting some structure on the day helps. Here are some suggestions.

Spend a brief time getting ready the night before. Ask God to bless the day, and tell him you want to devote the day to him. This day is your gift to God, but of course even more than that, it is a gift God wants to give to you. What do you need the Lord to give you? A sense of healing and forgiveness? Conviction for an apathetic heart? Compassion? A renewed sense of mission?

Arrange the day around listening to God. Here's a format I've adapted from Glandion Carney's *The Spiritual Formation Toolkit*:

8:00–9:00. Prepare your mind and heart. Take a walk, or do whatever will help you set aside concerns over other tasks. Try to arrange your morning so you can be in silence from the moment you first wake up.

9:00–11:00. Read and meditate on Scripture, taking time to stop and reflect when God seems to be speaking to you through the text.

11:00–Noon. Write down your responses to what you've read. Speak to God about these.

Noon–1:00. Grab some lunch and take a walk, reflecting on the morning.

1:00–2:00. Rest or nap.

2:00–3:00. Think about goals that have emerged from the day.

3:00–4:00. Write down these goals and any other thoughts in a journal. You may want to do this in the form of a letter to God.

—John Ortberg is senior pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. This article is adapted from *Leadership Journal*; copyright 1998 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What would you identify as your “scaffolding”? How can you get rid of it for periods of solitude?
2. Have you ever spent a large amount of time in voluntary solitude? If so, how did it go?
3. Does the schedule listed above look appealing or unappealing to you? Why?

An Introduction to Solitude

Learn to give God your undivided attention.

Henri Nouwen

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and place for God, and him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists, but also that he is actively present in our lives—healing, teaching, and guiding—we need to set aside time and space to give him our undivided attention.

Overcoming Obstacles

To bring some solitude into our lives is one of the most necessary, but also most difficult, disciplines. Even though we may have a deep desire for real solitude, we also experience a certain apprehension as we approach that solitary place and time. As soon as we are alone—without people to talk with, books to read, TV to watch, or phone calls to make—an inner chaos opens up in us. This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again.

Entering a private room and shutting the door, therefore, does not mean that we immediately shut out all our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, unresolved conflicts, angry feelings, and impulsive desires. On the contrary, when we have removed our outer distractions, we often find that our inner distractions manifest themselves to us in full force. We often use the outer distractions to shield ourselves from the interior noises. It is thus not surprising that we have a difficult time being alone. The confrontation with our inner conflicts can be too painful for us to endure.

This makes the discipline of solitude all the more important. Solitude is not a spontaneous response to an occupied and preoccupied life. There are too many reasons not to be alone. Therefore we must begin by carefully planning some solitude. Five or ten minutes a day may be all we can tolerate. Perhaps we are ready for an hour every day, an afternoon every week, a day every month, or a week every year. The amount of time will vary for each person according to temperament, age, job, lifestyle, and maturity.

But we do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him. We may have to write it in black and white in our daily calendar so that nobody else can take away this period of time. Then we will be able to say to our friends, neighbors, students, customers, clients, or patients, “I’m sorry, but I’ve already made an appointment at that time and it can’t be changed.”

Producing Fruit

Once we have committed ourselves to spending time in solitude, we develop an attentiveness to God’s voice in us. In the beginning—during the first days, weeks, or even months—we may have the feeling that we are simply wasting our time. Time in solitude may at first seem little more

than a time in which we are bombarded by thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from hidden areas of our mind.

One of the early Christian writers describes the first stage of solitary prayer as the experience of a man who, after years of living with open doors, suddenly decides to shut them. The visitors who used to come and enter his home start pounding on his doors, wondering why they are not allowed to enter. Only when they realize that they are not welcome do they gradually stop coming.

It is clear that what matters is faithfulness to the discipline. In the beginning, solitude seems so contrary to our desires that we are constantly tempted to run away from it. (One way of running away is daydreaming or simply falling asleep.) But when we stick to our discipline, in the conviction that God is with us even when we do not yet hear him, we slowly discover that we do not want to miss our time alone with God. Although we do not experience much satisfaction in our solitude, we realize that a day without solitude is less “spiritual” than a day with it.

Intuitively, we know that it is important to spend time in solitude. We even start looking forward to this strange period of uselessness. This desire for solitude is often the first sign of prayer, the first indication that the presence of God’s Spirit no longer remains unnoticed. As we empty ourselves of our many worries, we come to know not only with our mind, but also with our heart, that we never were really alone—that God’s Spirit was with us all along.

In solitude, we come to know the Spirit who has already been given to us. The pains and struggles we encounter in our solitude thus become the way to hope, because our hope is not based on something that will happen after our sufferings are over, but on the real presence of God’s healing Spirit in the midst of these sufferings. The discipline of solitude allows us gradually to come in touch with this hopeful presence of God in our lives, and allows us also to taste even now the beginnings of the joy and peace which belong to the new heaven and the new earth.

The discipline of solitude, as I have described it here, is one of the most powerful disciplines in developing a prayerful life. It is a simple, though not easy, way to free us from the slavery of our occupations and preoccupations and to begin to hear the voice that makes all things new.

Practical Suggestions

Let me give a more concrete description of how the discipline of solitude may be practiced. It is a great advantage to have a room, or a corner of a room, reserved for the discipline of solitude. Such a “ready” place helps us set our hearts on the kingdom without time-consuming preparations. The important thing is that the place of solitude remain a simple, uncluttered place. There we dwell in the presence of the Lord.

Our temptation is to do something useful: to read something stimulating, to think about something interesting, or to experience something unusual. But our moment of solitude is

precisely a moment in which we want to be in the presence of our Lord with empty hands—naked, vulnerable, useless, and without much to show, prove, or defend. That is how we slowly learn to listen to God’s small voice.

But what to do with our many distractions? Should we fight these distractions and hope that thus we will become more attentive to God’s voice? This does not seem the way to come to prayer. Creating an empty space where we can listen to God’s Spirit is not easy when we are putting all our energy into fighting distractions. By fighting distractions in such a direct way, we end up paying more attention to them than they deserve.

We have, however, the words of Scripture to which to pay attention. A psalm, a parable, a biblical story, a saying of Jesus, or a word of Paul, Peter, James, Jude, or John can help us to focus our attention on God’s presence. Thus we deprive those many other things of their power over us. When we place words from the Scriptures in the center of our solitude—whether a short expression, a few sentences, or a longer text—they can function as the point to which we return when we have wandered off in different directions. They form a safe anchoring place in a stormy sea.

This is only one specific form in which the discipline of solitude may be practiced. Endless variations are possible. Walks in nature, the repetition of short prayers, singing—these and many other elements can become a helpful part of the discipline of solitude. But we have to decide which particular form of this discipline best fits us, to which we can remain faithful.

It is better to have a daily practice of ten minutes solitude than to have a whole hour once in a while. Simplicity and regularity are the best guides in finding our way. They allow us to make the discipline of solitude as much a part of our daily lives as eating and sleeping. When that happens, our noisy worries will slowly lose their power over us, and the renewing activity of God’s Spirit will slowly make its presence known.

Although the discipline of solitude asks us to set aside time and space, what finally matters is that our hearts become like quiet cells where God can dwell, wherever we go and whatever we do. The more we train ourselves to spend time with God, and him alone, the more we will discover that God is with us at all times and in all places. Then we will be able to recognize him even in the midst of a busy and active life. Once the solitude of time and space has become a solitude of the heart, we will never have to leave that solitude. We will be able to live the spiritual life in any place and any time.

Thus the discipline of solitude enables us to live active lives in the world while remaining always in the presence of the living God.

—Henri Nouwen wrote over 40 books on the spiritual life and served as a professor and pastor. This article is adapted from Leadership Journal; copyright 1981 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Is it difficult to spend time in solitude, even when you have set aside a time and place to do so?
2. What are some ways to deal with the mental distractions that often occur in solitude?
3. What would you need to do in order to consistently spend 10 or 15 minutes in solitude every day?

The Discipline of Fasting

Spiritually directed fasting gives us supernatural power and biblical perspective.

Bob Coy

The heroes of the Bible—the mighty men and women of God who had an impact in society—all fasted. The list includes Moses, David, Paul, Isaiah, Nehemiah, Esther, and Elijah, among many others. Of course, most notable on that list is Jesus Christ. Jesus set aside 40 days to fast before he began his public ministry. If God incarnate felt it important to fast, shouldn't we?

Fasting Defined

In the Word of God, we see two different types of fasts. The first is an absolute fast, which is from Ezra 8. This involves no food and no water. Check with your physician before you try this. This kind of fasting needs to be directed by the Holy Spirit.

The second type is a specific fast, which can be found in Daniel 1. Daniel doesn't eat any of the king's delicacies. He doesn't want choice meat or wine. He eats vegetables and water. Some of you will say, "I like that. There are a few things I need to fast from—like chocolate." And you're going to try and conquer chocolate and not conquer basic foods. But I say you've got it reversed. Chocolate is a nicety; food is a necessity. When you tell your body no to food, and it grows to a point of submission, conquering chocolate will be easy.

Why Fast?

Matthew 6:17–18 says, "But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Did you catch that? *When* you fast—it's expected. It needs to be worked into your schedule. It's part of being a believer. But why? What benefits do we receive from fasting?

First, fasting is a demonstration of how serious we are about God. We live in a society where, the minute we want something, we meet the need. If I've got to have a Snickers in the afternoon, I have it. We train our bodies to expect instant satisfaction of every need. Eventually, we don't see any place in our lives where we have to deny ourselves anything. Therefore, for us as followers of God to actually set aside a meal and let the Lord know that an answer to prayer is more important than our nourishment, we must be serious.

Second, fasting changes us for the better. It solidifies our purpose. When we choose to fast, what happens? Our spirit is telling our flesh no. The purpose of fasting, according to Isaiah 58, is not just so we can do something religious or spiritual. It's a relational thing between our spiritual and physical selves. We choose not to eat, and then suddenly our spiritual world is not clouded. It's not fogged.

You see, food can distract and cloud and confuse us. After eating a big meal, we think, *I can't do much of anything at all. I just ate.* But when you fast a couple of days, the time you would have spent eating can now be spent seeking. Bible verses mean more than they ever meant before, and relationships mean more than they ever meant before. Why? Because we find we have a lot of time on our hands. And I promise—you'd be amazed what you can do with that time. Even better, we start to consider things like, *I'm not eating right now, and I'm hungry. I wonder how many people in this world right now are just as hungry as I am, but have no choice in the matter.*

Everyone has a paralyzed man that they would love to see walk. Is there any faith? Can you demonstrate that faith through fasting? Everyone has a sin they struggle with. Could you actually set aside a meal and find yourself so supernaturally supercharged that you're able to resist the enemy?

Spiritual Guidelines for Fasting

There are two guidelines that need to govern our attempts to fast:

Fasting needs to be directed by the Holy Spirit. In some circles I've seen a senior pastor choose to fast, and then place the congregation in the same position. But if you decide to fast out of obedience to another person, one of two things will probably happen. First, your heart will not be in it, and the fast will turn into a kind of bondage or routine. Second, an air of arrogance and accomplishment can develop in the hearts of those who are fasting when they compare themselves to those who are not. But if your fast is led by the Lord, then that air of arrogance cannot exist. Why? Because God is asking you to do it, not another person. It's God that you are blessing. It's God that you are following. It's God that you are obeying.

Fasting should be done privately, not for recognition or attention. According to Matthew 6, fasting, praying, and giving are all private matters of faith. When you pray, get in a closet. When you fast, don't let people see. There is something wonderful about private affection. Of course, public obedience and faith do need to be displayed. But it's in private the depth of our faith is truly demonstrated.

You Will Be Tempted

When we do choose to fast, we will encounter two main obstacles. The first is the temptation to tell. I strongly urge you to resist this one, because the temptation to tell other people diminishes the demonstration of faith that was supposed to be between you and God. The minute you say something, the rumors will appear—*He's fasting.* As you walk down the hallways at work, you'll hear the whispers: "He's powerful. There's nobody like him. He's not eating today. He loves God."

You'll also be tempted to eat. Because when you decide to fast in the afternoon, it will be that afternoon that somebody pops popcorn down the hall from you. Have you ever smelled buttered popcorn when you're not eating?

I want to see you finish well; I want to see you stay strong. You will find supernatural strength when you take the time to fast. It requires denial. It requires abstinence. It requires surrender and sacrifice. But the rewards are unbelievable.

—Bob Coy. *This article is adapted from a sermon on PreachingToday.com; copyright 2006 by Christianity Today.*

Discuss

1. What prompted the heroes of the Bible to fast? Was it everyday occasions or moments of crisis?
2. Which aspect of your body do you spend more time satisfying: the physical or the spiritual?
3. What situations in your life right now could be bolstered if you were to handle them with a supernatural strength acquired through fasting?

Beyond Fasting from Food

Fasting in 21st century culture

Richard Foster

The central idea in fasting is the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity. Remember, there is nothing wrong with these normal functions in life. It's just that there are times when we set them aside in order to concentrate on something more important.

Now, contrary to what most people think of when they ponder the subject of fasting, not all fasting is from food. That is the normal way Scripture speaks of the subject, and that is an important discipline. But I'd like to focus instead on a careful look at contemporary culture in order to see how fasting can speak to those issues. I'm talking about fasting in the 21st century.

Fasting from People

First, I think there is a great need for us to find times when we can fast from people. This is not because we are antisocial or because we don't like people. Rather, it's precisely because we love people intently, and when we are with them, we want to be a blessing to them—not a distraction. Thomas Merton observed, "It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers."

Have you ever taken a day just to be alone? What could be more recreational, what could be more exhilarating than a day alone with the Lord? Now I know what you're thinking: *I don't have time. Besides, I don't need it.* But Moses needed it. Elijah needed it. David needed it. Peter needed it. Paul needed it. Jesus Christ himself needed it. Who do we think we are? God Almighty? And if we need it, we'll find the time.

Fasting from Media

It is amazing to me that many people seem to be incapable, or at least unwilling, to go through an entire day concentrating on a single thing. Everything breaks up our sense of concentration—the newspaper, the radio, television, magazines. No wonder we feel like fractured people. We now have devices so that we will never find ourselves anyplace where—horror of horrors—we are without noise. Now that is slavery.

The apostle Paul said, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Submit not again to a yoke of slavery." I think it's amazing that we'll go off to camp for a week and say, "God spoke to me." And then we get back into the rush of life and God stops speaking. Right? No, we stop listening. What happened at camp was incredibly simple. All we did was get rid of enough distractions for a long enough period of time in order to concentrate. But you don't need camp to do that. You can do that right in the course of your daily life, taking up little disciplines of fasting from media.

Fasting from Our Phones

Third, I'd like to suggest times when we can fast from our phones. They are wonderful instruments—if they don't control us. I know people who will stop praying to answer the phone. Can you think of anything more absurd than that?

In our home when we are having a meal together, or when I am reading stories to my boys, we don't answer the phone. I want those boys to know that they are more important than anything that can be on that machine. Just try that some time as an experiment—let the phone ring or buzz and monitor your own feelings.

Fasting from Conversation

The discipline of silence is one of the most needed disciplines in our culture. Professors and pastors and politicians—all those who make a living by being good with words—so desperately need this spiritual discipline. Do you know one of the reasons we find it so hard to remain silent? It's because doing so makes us feel helpless. We're so accustomed to relying upon words to manage and control other people. If we're silent, who will take control? Well, God will take control.

You see, there is an intimate connection between trust and silence. The tongue is our most powerful weapon of manipulation, and so a constant stream of words flows from us because we're in this eternal effort to adjust our public image. Silence is one of the deepest disciplines of the spiritual life simply because it puts the stopper on all that. May I just urge all of us to discipline our words so that they will be few and full? Bonhoeffer wrote that when the tongue is under our authority, much that is unnecessary remains unsaid, but the helpful and essential thing can be said in a few words. Just try it sometime in a committee meeting at church. It makes the meetings much shorter.

In addition, you learn so much about prayer. For example, perhaps something needs to be said, and I think, *Wait a minute, maybe somebody else needs to deal with that. Lord, would you raise up a vessel? I'm willing to speak if it's right, but maybe somebody else is better suited.* And after a little bit, here comes somebody who speaks to the issue far better than I ever could have done, and I've learned something about the work of prayer. We need to fast from conversation.

Fasting from Advertising

Then fifth, I'd like to urge us to learn the discipline of fasting from advertising. I still remember the day that I was driving the Los Angeles freeway system when all of a sudden I realized that my mind had been dominated by the billboards for a solid hour. Now when you think of it, the idea that you're in good hands with Allstate is a first class heresy. The notion that Pepsi is the real thing or that Coke adds life is pornography of the first magnitude—that is, it is a complete distortion of what is actually the case.

When I suggest that we learn to fast from billboards and the like, I do not mean that we refrain from looking at billboards and ads; rather, that they be a signal to us of another

reality. When the ad team shouts out to us their obscenities “More, More, More” that can trigger into our minds another word, a rich, full-bodied word “Less, Less, Less.” When we’re bombarded with bigger than life pictures of foxy ladies and babies, maybe that can trigger into our minds another world, a world in which 460 million people are the victims of acute hunger. Ten thousand of them will be dead before we go to sleep tonight. A world in which a million hogs in Indiana have superior housing to a billion people on this planet.

Fasting from Our Consumer Culture

Finally, we need to discover times when we will fast from the gluttonous consumer culture that we find so comfortable. For our soul’s sake, we need times when we can go among Christ’s favorites—the broken, the bruised, the dispossessed—not to preach to them, but to learn from them.

We need to see the poverty in the slums of our cities, and to hear the whimpering, moaning songs they sing. We need to force ourselves to look around and see the twins lying naked and unmoving on the small cot. They will soon die—victims of malnutrition. And like me, you want to turn away and forget that world, but we need to stay there and see the little boy whose brain is already vegetating from *marasmus*, a severe form of malnutrition. Maria, the mother, tries to speak to us, but words do not come. Tears do come—the tears of a brokenhearted mother.

I say that for the sake of our balance. For the sake of our sanity, we need times when we can be among those who, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, live an eternal compulsory fast.

—Richard Foster. *This article is adapted from a sermon on PreachingToday.com; copyright 1984 by Christianity Today.*

Discuss

1. Which of the experiences listed above have you intentionally fasted from already? What was the outcome?
2. Which of the experiences listed above would you have the most difficulty fasting from?
3. What actions do you need to take in order to begin fasting from these experiences?

The Practice of Slowing

How to ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life

John Ortberg

One of the great illusions of our day is that hurrying will buy us more time. Churches obsess over getting services finished on time. Cell phones now interrupt more sermons than cranky babies.

Ironically, our efforts have not produced what we're after—a sense of what might be called “timefulness,” of having enough time. In fact, quite the reverse is true, which is a dangerous thing. The danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.

An Old Problem

Though our society exemplifies “hurry sickness,” it's not a new problem. Church leaders have been subject to it at least since the days of Jesus. During one hectic season of ministry, Mark notes of the disciples, “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.”

Far too many people involved in ministry think of this as a life verse—as if God will reward the hectic one day with, “What a life you had! Many were coming and going, and you had no leisure even to eat. Well done!” Not quite. Jesus was aware of this problem, and he constantly withdrew from crowds and activities.

If you want to follow someone, you can't go faster than the one who is leading. Following Jesus cannot be done at a sprint. Jesus was often busy, but he was never *hurried*. Being busy is an outer condition; being hurried is a sickness of the soul. Jesus never went about the busyness of his ministry in a way that severed the life-giving connection with his Father. He never did it in a way that interfered with his ability to give love. He observed a regular rhythm of withdrawal from activity for solitude and prayer. He ruthlessly eliminated hurry from his life.

Life in the Slow Lane

We don't have to live this way. The hurried can become unhurried. But it will not happen by trying alone, nor will it happen instantly. You will have to enter a life of training. One useful practice is called “slowing.” This involves cultivating patience by deliberately choosing to place yourself in positions where you have to wait. For instance, over the next few days or weeks, try these:

1. Deliberately drive in the slow lane on the expressway. It may be that not swerving from lane to lane will cause you to arrive five minutes later. But you will find that you don't get nearly so angry at other drivers. Instead of trying to pass them, say a little prayer as they go by, asking God to bless them.
2. Eat your food slowly. Force yourself to chew at least 15 times before each swallow.

3. At the grocery store, discover which check-out line is the longest, and get in it. Then let one person go in front of you.
4. Re-read a book.
5. Take an hour simply to be with God. Don't use this time for anything related to ministry. Don't *use* this time at all. Simply be with God.

In short, find ways to make hurry impossible. As you practice them, tell God you trust him to enable you to accomplish all that you need to get done.

—John Ortberg is senior pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. This article is adapted from *Leadership Journal*; copyright 1998 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. In general, do you have enough time to accomplish what you need to accomplish?
2. Do the five “slowing” practices listed above sound appealing or unappealing? Why?
3. Are you contributing to “hurry sickness” in the lives of your co-leaders?

Sabbath for Church Leaders

How to rest when you work in the church

Lynne M. Baab

Some church leaders observe Sabbath well. Their day away from work is markedly different from the other six, and there is something special and holy about what they do—and don't do—on that day. For others, the Sabbath feels like another work day. It isn't set apart. It isn't even restful. When you work with holy things all week long, what is it you are resting from when Sabbath finally arrives?

Two Sabbath Commands

Nine of the Ten Commandments remain similar between the two versions of the commandments (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5). But the fourth commandment differs significantly, beginning with the opening imperative verb. "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8, NRSV). The second version begins with "observe" (Deuteronomy 5:12). These two verbs capture significant aspects of the Sabbath challenge. A healthy, obedient, and life-giving Sabbath involves habits of observance as well as a commitment to remember.

These two commands reflect the two central acts of God in human history: God as Creator and God as Redeemer. A helpful reflection for Sabbath observance begins here. What practices help you experience God as Creator? Perhaps walking, hiking, biking, gardening, painting, or reading poetry? What practices help you experience the freedom God has given us in Christ, our redemption from slavery? Turning off the computer, the phone, or the TV? Turning off worry or the temptation to obsess over ministry issues? These are practices to consider for a Sabbath observance.

For people whose lives revolve around ministry, these two reasons for Sabbath observance can be helpful in another way, too. Christians are called to partner with God in sustaining the creation and redeeming the world. Our profession is heavily weighted on the redemption side. We spend our days creating structures and working with individuals to help people grasp the great gift of redemption and eternal life we have in Jesus Christ.

On the Sabbath, then, those of us in ministry may benefit most and honor God most by engaging with God as Creator. We rest from our partnership with God in redeeming the world by acknowledging God as Creator as well as Redeemer.

Sabbath with Family

One of the challenges for people in ministry involves family members. If our ministry leaves us fatigued from contact with people, how can we then embrace time with family members on our Sabbath?

Two keys to happy Sabbaths with young children are to eliminate multi-tasking and to reduce expectations of a profound spiritual experience with children. Simply enjoying them, without trying to get something else done at the same time, can be quite refreshing and honors the gift from God that comes to us in children. A short Bible story, an easy craft activity, or a brief prayer time can help to keep the focus on God, but too much stress on those activities can turn the day of rest into work.

Another key to healthy Sabbaths for people in ministry comes from the root meaning of the word Sabbath: stop, pause, cease, desist, or rest. The heart of Sabbath is stopping, not finding more things to do. Vital to the “success” of such Sabbath devotion is, frankly, keeping expectations low and the activities quite simple. When we expect our Sabbath to be highly “spiritual,” it becomes one more thing to do, continuing the addiction to productivity that is so common in our culture.

—Lynne M. Baab is author of *Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest*. This article is adapted from *Leadership Journal*; copyright 2007 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. In your mind, what’s the difference between “remembering” and “observing” the Sabbath?
2. How do you experience God as Creator? How do you experience him as Redeemer?
3. Are your expectations for a Sabbath experience too high? Why or why not?

The Discipline of Confession and Self-Examination

The value of opening ourselves to God and others

Adele Calhoun

Self-examination is a process whereby the Holy Spirit opens my heart to what is true about me. That is not the same thing as a neurotic, shame-inducing inventory. Instead it is a way of opening myself to God within the safety of his love so that I can authentically seek transformation. Confession embraces Christ's gift of forgiveness and restoration while setting us on the path to renewal and change.

My desire in confession and self-examination is to surrender my weaknesses and faults to the forgiving love of Christ, and to intentionally desire and embrace practices that lead to transformation. Such practices include:

- Admitting to God my natural propensity to rationalize, deny, blame, and self-obsess
- Examining the "sin network" in my life as evidenced in presumptuous sins, besetting weaknesses, self-centered habits, and broken relationships
- Replacing sinful habits with healthy ones
- Seeking God's grace to change
- Confessing sins by examining my life in the light of the seven deadly sins, the Ten Commandments, prayers of confession found in Scripture (Psalm 51), or a life confession or journaling confessions

Spiritual Exercises

1. Imagine you are in a safe place, surrounded by the love of God. Ask God to help you see yourself as he sees you. Remember that he sees you absolutely and with love. Using the Ten Commandments as a guide, journal your sins. When you have finished, go through each commandment one at a time, asking God to forgive you and help you to change. Then burn your list in a symbolic act of what it means to have God remove your sins from you.
2. Set aside some time for confession and self-examination. In the presence of God, ask for light to pierce your defenses. Then ask yourself, *Who have I injured recently through thoughtlessness, neglect, anger, and so on?* As the Holy Spirit brings people to your mind, confess your feelings about these people to God. Ask God to forgive you and, if need be, to give you grace to forgive them. Write an apology, make a phone call, or confess out loud in an attempt to get the relationship back on track.
3. Make a life confession, either alone or to a trusted confessor. Dividing your life into seven-year segments, reflect on the sins particular to each segment. Confess your sins aloud. Receive the freedom that comes from knowing you stand completely in the clear before a holy God.
4. Ask some of your family and close friends to help you see your blind spots. Ask questions like, *What do I do that hurts you? How could I better love you? What is it like*

to be with me? Do I show interest in others or talk mostly about myself? Let their answers guide you in a time of decision.

5. Enter into a covenant group or an accountability relationship where you cannot hide. Tell the truth about who you are and ask your partners to pray for you and help you change.
6. Begin to notice your strong emotions. When do you feel yourself getting hot, defensive, angry, withdrawn? What is motivating your emotion? What behavior stems from your emotion? As you attend to this internal world, ask God to make you alert to what triggers strong emotional reactions. Confess any sins relating to these actions. Practice noticing your internal world, and begin to develop a habit of immediate confession.

— Adele Calhoun has worked in Christian ministry for over 40 years and is currently co-pastor, with her husband, Doug, of Redeemer Community Church in Needham, Massachusetts. This article is excerpted from [Spiritual Disciplines Handbook](#); used with permission.

Discuss

1. Describe your most recent experience with confession and/or self-examination. What were the results?
2. Which of the confessional practices mentioned above would you benefit most from?
3. Which of the spiritual exercises would be hardest to achieve?

The Discipline of Journaling

Mapping your private world can bring your soul into focus.

Gordon MacDonald

When I started journaling it was because I needed a friend, and I wasn't doing well with the human kind. I had passed through several weeks of high stress, the kind that young pastors are never ready to face. I'd ignored the need for spiritual refreshment; I'd neglected my family; I'd allowed myself to become overwhelmed by the problems of people. There I was, one Saturday morning, crying uncontrollably in the arms of my wife.

It was a scary moment and gave me a taste of the empty soul. This must not happen again, I thought, and it came to me that writing each day in a journal would press me to deal more forthrightly with my emotions, with my spiritual state (or lack of), and with the meaning of my life. I was not disappointed.

Journaling Defined

What was my journal's purpose? A journal is a dialogue with the soul. It includes a record of events, but it also attempts to expose the significance of the events. What is God saying through this? What am I learning? How do I feel? What are the principles that ooze from these events?

Beyond that, I wanted the journal to be a story of my own journey and the journey (as much as possible) of those closest to me. The high and low points of my marriage are in the journals. Our children and grandchildren will one day be able to go back and recapture the salient events of their lives as seen through a father's eyes. They will know how much I have loved them and how proud I am of their life choices. There are many moments when I have used my journal to pray and worship. Here and there are the indications of spiritual breakthroughs. And the journal has preserved vivid memories of the most remarkable (good and bad) moments of life.

What Journaling Produces

When journaling is done regularly, several things become possible:

The invisible and the ephemeral are forced into reality. Once feelings, fears, and dreams are named, they can be dealt with, prayed for, and surrendered to God. They come under control, no longer existing in a way that pollutes the soul and the mind.

Learning experiences are preserved. If I record and reflect on the experiences of each day, I add to my base of wisdom. Things usually forgotten or lost in the unconscious now, like books on a library shelf, wait to be tapped when parallel moments arise in the future.

Memories of God's great and gracious acts are preserved. "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it," God said to Moses

after a great victory. As Israel wandered through the wilderness and experienced God's providential care, he had them build monuments so they could remember. One day, I realized that my journal writing was a memorial to God's sufficiency.

I can chart areas where I need most to grow and mature. As I look at journals of 30 years ago, I realize I have struggled with the same knot of issues throughout the years. The good news: the steps I took in the early days as I wrote of these issues turned into disciplines. And today, while issues remain, my overcoming rate is substantially higher. I wouldn't have spotted many of these issues if I'd not written about them day after day.

It brings dreams alive. As ideas have flooded my mind over the years, I have written about them. Putting them into words helped me to discern the foolish ideas and develop the good ones. Many things I've done in the last few years had origins I can find in earlier journals.

— *Gordon MacDonald is editor at large of Leadership Journal and chancellor of Denver Seminary. This article is adapted from Leadership Journal; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.*

Discuss

1. Have you ever kept a journal? Was it a positive or negative experience?
2. What appeals to you most about keeping a regular journal? What appeals to you least?
3. Which of the products of journaling above seem the most beneficial?

The Discipline of Discernment

Principles for identifying and following God's will

Adele Calhoun

The practice of biblical discernment opens us to listen to and recognize the voice and patterns of God's direction in our lives. It involves more than good judgment, open doors, and decision-making skills. Right discernment arises out of a relationship with God in prayer. It is founded on the reality of the Holy Spirit's presence within us.

The practice of discernment includes:

- Taking time to listen to God, not hurrying to make a decision
- Seeking to bring both head and heart into alignment with God's will
- Asking for help, counsel, and guidance
- Going on a retreat to gain perspective and listen to God
- Attending to the desires God has placed deeply inside you
- Naming your addictions, predilections, prejudices, unbelief, and so on in order to understand how these play into making decisions

Suggestions for Listening to God

Take your time. It is best not to do all of these steps at once. The brain gets tired, anxiety takes over, and you can end up trying to force the hand of God. Listening for God's direction takes time. Not every decision you make will need to incorporate all these steps. Some choices are easier than others.

1. Come into the presence of the Holy One, focusing your attention on his love and goodness. Thank God that you have a Guide who is on your side and wants to help you.
2. Consider what it means to be totally attached to God's agenda and will. Confess any idols of your heart that block your trust.
3. Lay your choice before God and examine the matter thoroughly. If it helps to journal the scope of the decision, commit your thoughts to writing.
4. Share your desires with God. What is it you want? Does your desire reflect some deeper desire? How does your desire or choice line up with the love of God and others? How does the choice lead you deeper into faithfulness and goodness?
5. Use reason. How does this decision enable you to live out the Fruit of the Spirit? Write your pros-and-cons list—weigh the advantages and benefits, the disadvantages and dangers of each option.
6. Attend to your feelings. What about this choice leads to life-giving feelings that bring in the Spirit's fruit of love, joy, faith, and peace? What excites you and gives you hope? Picture yourself in this situation for a length of time; what do you sense? What about this choice leads to life-thwarting feelings of turmoil, confusion, and anxiety?

7. Listen to God as you read Scripture. Pay attention to where the Word lights up and speaks to you.
8. Seek the counsel of those gifted in discernment who can listen to you and with you.
9. Offer your choice to God. Pray for wisdom and the freedom of the Spirit to blow through you. Wait. Ask God to bring your heart and head and spirit into agreement. Do they all confirm this course of action?

Spiritual Exercises

1. To discern where the Holy Spirit has been recently working in your life, answer the following questions: For what am I longing? What themes keep recurring in my life? Where am I struggling? What is most life-giving to me? What is least life-giving?
2. It is seldom wise to make a decision at a deep point of desolation, because it can provoke premature decisions. Name some causes of desolation in your life: fatigue, overextension, sloth, fear, emotional blocks, loss of trust. How do these things play into your decision-making process? Ask God to enable you to wait through a time of desolation so as better to hear his voice.
3. Catalog major decisions in your life to date. Beside each one, write your decision-making process. Which decisions felt best and worst? Why?
4. Divide your life into seven-year segments. For each period, record the deepest desire of your heart. What desires resurface again and again? How do you listen to these desires in your discernment process? Talk to God about the desires of your heart.

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Discuss

1. How does the way you spend your time and energy reveal what's important to you?
2. Which of the suggestions for listening to God do you most want to practice? Why?
3. Which of the spiritual exercises do you most want to practice? Why?

Further Exploration

Resources to help you find focus through the spiritual disciplines.

[SmallGroups.com](#). We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples through life-changing community.

- [Go Deeper with God](#)
- [Plan a One-Day Retreat for Leaders](#)
- [Plan a One-Day Retreat for Your Small Group](#)
- [Spiritual Disciplines Assessment Pack](#)
- [Spiritual Disciplines for Small Groups](#)

[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#). A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

[LeadershipJournal.net](#). A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders.

[GiftedforLeadership.com](#). A website ministering to women leaders.

[Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth](#)

Richard J. Foster

HarperSanFrancisco, 1998

Foster's masterpiece has served for decades as a handbook on the central practices of the Christian faith.

[Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us](#)

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

InterVarsity Press, 2005

Instead of just giving information about spiritual disciplines, this handbook is full of practical, accessible guidance that helps you actually do.

[The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives](#)

Dallas Willard

HarperSanFrancisco, 1999

A great book that can help us understand how God transforms our lives.