What are spiritual disciplines?

Christian Living · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/what-are-spiritual-disciplines/

Spiritual disciplines are intentional practices that help Christians grow in their relationship with God. They are not ways of earning salvation or gaining God's favor. Rather, they are God-given means through which believers place themselves in the path of His transforming grace (1 Tim. 4:7–8; Col. 2:6–7).

In the same way that physical exercise strengthens the body, spiritual disciplines help cultivate spiritual maturity. They do not change us by their own power; only the Holy Spirit can do that. But God often uses these practices to deepen our faith, shape our character, and draw us closer to Christ.

The New Testament presents several disciplines as normal parts of the Christian life. Prayer (Matt. 6:5–13), Bible reading and meditation (Ps. 1:1–3; 2 Tim. 3:16–17), worship (Heb. 10:24–25), fasting (Matt. 6:16–18), fellowship (Acts 2:42), generosity (2 Cor. 9:6–8), confession (James 5:16), and service (Gal. 5:13) all appear as regular practices among God's people.

It is important to understand that spiritual disciplines are not ends in themselves. The Pharisees prayed, fasted, and studied Scripture extensively, yet Jesus rebuked them because their hearts were far from God (Matt. 23:23–28). A person can practice spiritual disciplines outwardly while remaining spiritually cold inwardly. The goal is not merely doing religious activities; the goal is knowing Christ more deeply and being conformed to His image (Phil. 3:8–10).

Historically, Christians have spoken about both "personal" and "corporate" disciplines. Personal disciplines include private prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting, solitude, and self-examination. Corporate disciplines include gathering for worship, receiving the Lord's Supper, hearing God's Word preached, serving alongside other believers, and participating in the life of the church. While modern Western Christianity often emphasizes individual spirituality, the New Testament consistently presents spiritual growth as something that happens within the community of faith (Heb. 10:24–25).

The word "discipline" itself comes from the same root as "disciple." A disciple is a learner or follower. Spiritual disciplines are simply practices that help us follow Jesus more faithfully. They are not obligations that make God love us more. They are gifts that help us live more consciously

in the reality of His love.

Different Christian traditions emphasize certain disciplines more than others. Some place greater emphasis on fasting and fixed-hour prayer. Others stress Bible study, evangelism, or personal devotion. Despite these differences, Christians throughout history have generally agreed that spiritual disciplines are valuable tools for cultivating a deeper walk with God.

One helpful way to think about spiritual disciplines is this: they do not earn God's presence; they help us become more aware of the presence of the God who is already with us.

Key Scriptures to Study

- Psalm 1:1–3 — Meditating on God's Word produces spiritual fruitfulness.
- Matthew 6:5–18 — Jesus teaches on prayer, fasting, and giving.
- Luke 5:16 — Jesus regularly withdrew for prayer.
- Acts 2:42 — The early church devoted itself to teaching, fellowship, prayer, and worship.
- Romans 12:1–2 — Spiritual growth involves ongoing transformation.
- 1 Timothy 4:7–8 — Believers are called to train themselves for godliness.
- Hebrews 10:24–25 — Christians are not meant to grow in isolation.
- James 5:16 — Confession and prayer are means of spiritual strengthening.
- Philippians 3:8–10 — The ultimate goal is knowing Christ more deeply.

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: "Aren't spiritual disciplines just works-based religion?"

Response: Not when understood correctly. Spiritual disciplines do not save us or make us more deserving of God's grace. They are responses to God's grace, not attempts to earn it (Eph. 2:8–10).

Common Objection: "Do I have to practice every spiritual discipline?"

Response: No. Scripture presents a variety of disciplines, and believers often find certain practices especially helpful in different seasons of life. The goal is growth in Christ, not mastering a checklist.

Common Objection: "Why should I pray or read Scripture if God already knows everything?"

Response: Because spiritual disciplines are not primarily about informing God. They are about shaping us. Prayer deepens our dependence on Him, and Scripture renews our minds and hearts (Rom. 12:2).

Common Objection: "I don't feel anything when I practice spiritual disciplines."

Response: Spiritual growth is often gradual rather than dramatic. Just as physical exercise produces results over time, spiritual disciplines often bear fruit through consistent practice rather than immediate emotional experiences.

Why This Matters

Spiritual disciplines help believers remain rooted in Christ amid the distractions and pressures of daily life. They create space for God's Word to shape our thinking, His Spirit to convict and encourage us, and His people to strengthen us in faith.

Without intentional spiritual habits, it is easy for faith to become passive or neglected. Spiritual disciplines are not about becoming more religious; they are about becoming more like Jesus. They help move Christianity from something we merely believe to something we actively live.

Recommended Resources

- *Practicing the Way* — John Mark Comer
- *Celebration of Discipline* — Richard J. Foster
- *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* — Donald S. Whitney
- *The Spirit of the Disciplines* — Dallas Willard
- *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* — Eugene H. Peterson