

F S P S
A T R H
S O A H
T P Y H

spiritual disciplines for a joy filled life



Fast, Stop, Pray, Shhh

Spiritual disciplines for a joy filled life.

“Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”

Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline

Introduction

Jesus said “I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Is that your experience of life? Is it full, abundant, joy-filled? The bible gives us spiritual disciplines to move us beyond surface level living and into the depths of God’s heart. They are not given to us as a means to impress God. Rather they are his gift to us, in order for us to become more alive, more real. We must not believe the lie that this is all there is so we should just make the most of it – there is more! Neither should we believe that these spiritual disciplines are only for the spiritual giants of old and unobtainable to us mere mortals. Consider them an invitation from your heavenly Father into the truest, deepest communion. The communion you were created for.

So use this series to shape your life and walk with God. Be intentional, give it a go. Carve out time to stop and be still. Make space to be alone and away from daily life even for a day. Learn to pray and listen to God in the silence. Let God himself teach you to pray and meet with him.

You were created to find your primary joy in God. It’s a joy that no-one and no situation can steal away. Our prayer is that the door to joy will be opened for you over these next four weeks, and that you will continue walking in these disciplines throughout your life.

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Fasting



Introduction

The bible is full of examples of fasting and prayer. There are many reasons we might fast. For example, our lives are full of food and 'stuff'. Fasting is simplifying life, pulling back, slowing down. It's also a cry of dependance on God, you'll need his strength to do it. This draws us into him. Fasting can also redirect our hunger. In the West we're never hungry for anything and that often translates to our faith. We're not that hungry for God. Not that bothered whether we meet him or not. Fasting feeds our hunger for God, it grows our faith. There is also a sense in which it supercharges prayer! Now we have to be careful here, the bible doesn't do formulas, but there is a sense that prayer and fasting together brings breakthrough in our lives, and in the lives of those around us. If you want things to change, fast and pray. If you aren't bothered whether they do or not, definitely fast and pray!

Opening questions

Have you ever fasted before? What was it like?

Why might fasting be different to a diet?

Is fasting only a food thing?

How to fast

Read Matthew 6:16-18

What does Jesus accuse some of his hearers of doing whilst fasting?

Why isn't this ok?

Why might people have wanted others to know that they are fasting?

Is there a link between fasting and reward? If yes, what might that reward be?

What does Jesus instruct the crowd to do instead?

Why might God the Father enjoy the things we do in secret?

The results of fasting

Read Luke 4: 1-11

What do you notice about the way the devil addresses Jesus in v3 and 6?

What does Jesus' dependence on the Father and Holy Spirit through his immense fast allow him to do?

How is Jesus affirmed in his identity through this?

What might this tell us about the importance of fasting?

Read Acts 13:1-3

The church at Antioch are praying and fasting together, what is the result of this?

What does fasting and prayer potentially open up as a greater possibility?

Read Acts 14:21-23

How is the church strengthened by the discipline of fasting?

How do you think fasting could be a helpful discipline in the Christian life?

Application

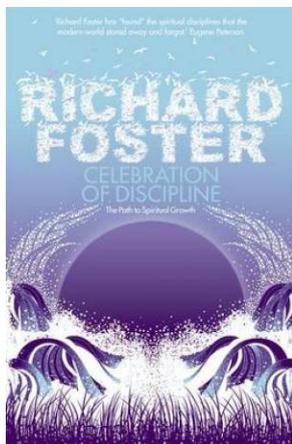
Fasting is an incredible way to make space for God. Today we've seen the power of God in fasting, affirming identity, fighting temptation, bringing breakthrough and giving direction. As well as the importance of it being an act of worship. Something done for God in secret. Fasting walks hand in hand with the other spiritual disciplines in this series.

Is there anything in your life that you know has power over you? Mobile phone, games console, shopping, gossip, negativity? Take this opportunity to notice it and consciously fast from it this week or so. Invite God into the fast and note the difference at end of the time.

Do you want to know who God says you are? Set a day or period of time aside to fast and pray. In that time ask God to tell you what he thinks about you.

Is there an area in your life or the life of another that you want to see breakthrough in? Commit to regular fasting and prayer toward that end.

Resource



Richard Foster: Celebration of Discipline

This book is an absolute gold mine on the whole spiritual life. It is one that every follower of Jesus should own. It's theological yet simple and challenging but not impossible. He writes for the everyday person trying to follow Jesus in the everyday world.

There is a very useful chapter on fasting.

Solitude



Introduction

We live in a society where we need never be 'alone'. We have entertainment available constantly - TV, radio, phones, computers, the list goes on. So why should we even think about solitude? Because Jesus did. This study will draw on several verses from scripture demonstrating Jesus' regular retreats to times of solitude and prayer. Of course, being with others is great and we are made to live in community, however, let's spend some time learning about the wonderful practice of solitude and wait for Jesus - he will transform us into His likeness if we stop and focus on him.

The Spiritual Disciplines are offered to us as a gift for our personal transformation and growth. They require regular 'training' (see 1 Timothy 4; 8-16), intention and commitment. Jesus demonstrates that solitude is crucial for shaping us. We are formed by our habits.

Opening questions

What is Solitude?

Do you like being alone or do you deliberately avoid it? Why?

What is different about simply 'being alone' and spiritual solitude?

Now let's look at the times when Jesus sought solitude:

Following his baptism

Luke 4 v 1. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

Immediately following the beheading of John the Baptist

Matthew 14 v 13: ¹³When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.

Immediately following the feeding of the 5000

Matthew 14 v 23. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Immediately before heading to Galilee to preach and before healing a man with leprosy

Mark 1 v 35. ³⁵Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

After walking on water and calming the storm

Mark 6 v 12-13. ¹²They went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. 31-32. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest". 46. ⁴⁶After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

After healing a man with leprosy

Luke 5 v 15-16. ¹⁵Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. ¹⁶But Jesus **often** withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (emphasis added)

Immediately before calling the twelve disciples

Luke 6 v 12. ¹²One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.

Where does Jesus go to find solitude?

When does Jesus withdraw to Solitude? Can you notice a theme here?

What does He do when he is alone?

Now let's consider why Jesus would have chosen regular times of solitude. The book of Psalms is the Jewish book of prayer and Jesus would have known it off-by-heart. Here are three short sections of the Psalms and one verse from Isaiah:

Psalm 46 v10.

He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."

Psalm 23 v 1-3.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

Psalm 62 v1-5

¹ Truly my soul finds rest in God;
my salvation comes from him.
² Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.
³ How long will you assault me?
Would all of you throw me down—
this leaning wall, this tottering fence?
⁴ Surely they intend to topple me
from my lofty place;
they take delight in lies.
With their mouths they bless,
but in their hearts they curse.^[b]
⁵ Yes, my soul, find rest in God;
my hope comes from him.

Isaiah 40 v 31.

But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

God tells us to stop ("Be still") and remember that He is God. What does God want to use
our time of solitude for?

Why is praying alone significant, rather than always praying with others? (Matt 6 v 5-6)

- Consider this under the headings of "Focus" and "Freedom"

How does God want to bring you joy through this discipline?

Application

Read Psalm 1 v 1-3. It is likely that Jesus would have meditated on the Psalms during his times of solitude. Lectio Divina is an ancient practice of scripture meditation, in which scripture is recognised as the Living Word of God. Rather than simply reading the Bible to learn or praying to present our requests to God, Lectio Divina involves the following steps:

1. Chose a passage from scripture.
2. Open your mind to finding Jesus within the passage. Read the passage, perhaps several times.
3. Read it again, slowly, allowing the Holy Spirit to illuminate certain parts of the passage. Stop when you feel you should and ponder that section of scripture before moving on. Listen.
4. Pray the passage - say it aloud
5. Contemplate - remain silent and listen. Then go and put into practice what you have heard.

Either now, or this week during your time with God, perhaps you could try this?

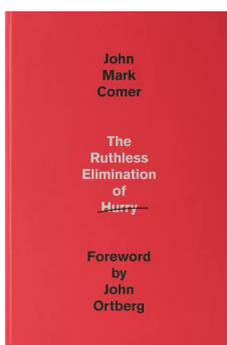
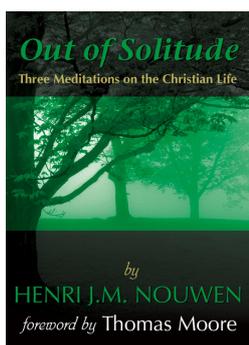
Now spend some time considering how solitude/time along with God could become one of your habits (spiritual disciplines).

What would solitude look like for you? How could it become a regular practice?

Where would you like to be when you're alone with God?

Pray that God would stir up in you a desire to spend time with him and provide space for you to be alone with Him. Be intentional in your desire to spend time alone with God and he will transform you.

Resources



Henri Nouwen: Out of solitude
John Mark Comer: The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry

Nouwen is a brilliant spiritual writer. He offers superb insight into the necessity of deep connection with God in the Christian life. Comer has written his book for the modern person who finds that life gives them too many reasons not to slow down and meet with God.

Prayer



Please read Luke 11:1-13 and Romans 8:26-28

Verse 1

- What caused the disciples to ask Jesus how to pray?

How to Pray

Verses 2-4

Praise

- What does 'Father, hallowed be your name' mean?
- What does it tell us about praise, adoration and thanksgiving in prayer?

Confess

- What does 'forgive us our sins, lead us not into temptation' tell us about saying sorry to God and confessing our failings?
- How does acknowledging our failings and weaknesses and not pretending bring intimacy with God?

Petition

- What does 'your kingdom come, give us each day our daily bread' tell us about what we can ask God in prayer?
- In what ways does this acknowledge we aren't self-sufficient but need help in our struggles?

Some Practical actions

Contemplation is reflecting on God and an aspect of His character and identity.

Meditation on the word is listening to God, as He speaks through the bible, by reflecting deeply on a bible passage.

Music includes hymns, choruses and songs which enable us to adore God with emotions and our mind.

Prayer lists. Some people write a prayer list, to record what they have prayed, so that they can pray regularly for the same thing/person, or in order to be reminded of what prayers have been answered.

- Have you tried any of these, and what do you think might be helpful?

Why Pray

Verses 5-10 God answers

- Note that God is different in character to the person in the story because He is willing not reluctant. What does this story tell us about boldness, perseverance and persistence in prayer?
- What does ask, seek and knock say about God answering prayer?
- Does this give you confidence in prayer, to hang on in faith to things you have asked God for?

Verses 11-13 God meets us

- If we have a Father who loves us, how will this affect our prayer?

Spiritual discipline is about healthy habits that help us. But 'discipline' sounds like legalism and effort. The opposite of this is licence and *laisse faire*.

- How does a loving Father mean neither legalism nor licence in prayer but rather grace? How much effort do we need and how much do we need to just trust?
- How does God change us in prayer?

God at work

Romans 8:26-28

- Prayer has been described as a two way communication with God and an encounter with God. How does the Holy Spirit help?
- How much is prayer a duty and how much a relationship?
- If it looks like our prayer request hasn't been answered, what does this passage have to say about it?

Daily Prayer

Can you find a time once or twice in a day when you can spend a few minutes praying. Some people like to be in ongoing communication with God all through the day rather than a set time.

How might you use praise, confession and petition in your prayers.

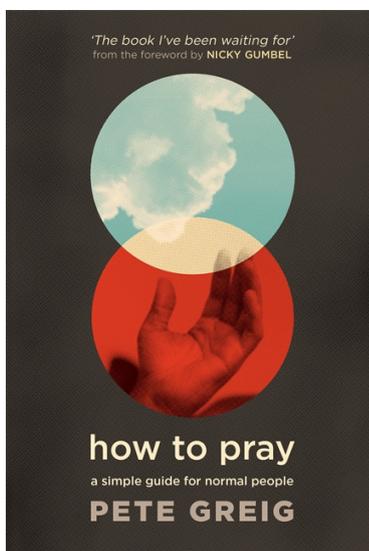
How can you incorporate meditation on the word in your prayer?

Try using a prayer list.

How and when you do daily prayer will probably vary depending on the stage of life you are at, including children and work. Seek to find a time and place that suits you, no matter how short a time it is. With small children you may have to grab a moment when you can. Remember this is a relationship between you and God, not a work duty.

- Discuss when and how you might pray daily.

Resource



Pete Greig: How to pray

Pete Greig started the 24/7 prayer movement and in this book aims to help everyday people to develop a prayer life which nourishes and enriches every area of life and deepens connection with God. It's written both for the novice and those who've been praying their whole lives.

Sshhh (Silence)



Introduction

When was the last time you really experienced silence? Often we find that in this busy world silence becomes an uncomfortable companion. It confronts us with the questions we've used busy-ness to ignore. But silence in the Bible and throughout Church history is seen as a gift. It is a place of encounter with God, the way we connect the deepest part of ourselves with God. Let this study open your eyes and heart to the importance of finding time to be silent with God. As you practice it, it will become a deep place of life, connection and infilling for you as you meet with your Heavenly Father.

Read 1 Kings 19:9b - 18

How is Elijah feeling at the beginning of this passage?

Why is God's presence important? (Both for Elijah and more generally).

What strikes you about how God reveals himself?

Why do you think God chooses to reveal himself in this way?

How does silence help us?

How do you generally expect or want God speak to you?

Have you ever experienced the “gentle whisper of God”

Read Habakkuk 2:20.

Why is the earth told to be silent before God?

What does this tell us about who God is?

Read Isaiah 30:15.

Why are quietness and trust put together here?

How can quietness make us strong?

How does physical quietness help us access God?

Why is a quiet heart important?

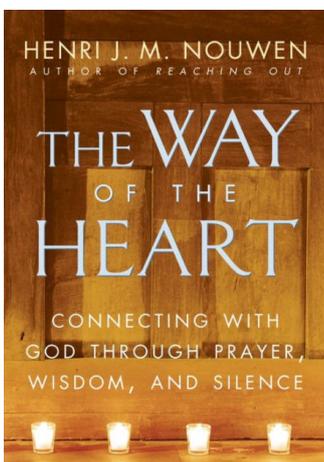
Application

What are the things that make it difficult to be quiet for you (both internally and externally)

Elijah begins by pouring out his heart to God, then journeys into his presence, meeting him in the quiet. Practically, in real life, how can we practice journeying into quiet?

What can you pray for God to change in your heart so that you can hold silence there?

Resource



Henri Nouwen: The Way of the Heart

In this beautiful book Nouwen explores the wisdom and practice of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Faithful followers of Jesus who went to live out in the desert in order to learn to explore and enjoy silence with God. Although in some ways this might seem an extreme response, Nouwen weaves their desert experience into modern day practice and living. Delving the depths of the wisdom of the desert and making it accessible for the modern person.