

Spiritual Disciplines: Introduction

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning and welcome to our online service for Sunday, January 10th, 2021.

Here we are. My name is Kent Dixon. I'm the lead pastor of Braemar Baptist Church here in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and it's good to be back with you this morning. Well, can you believe that?

That it's 2021. You know, as scary and stressful as 2020 was, and as much as it dragged on in so many ways, I think we're all quite happy to move on from it and to recognize that it is behind us now.

Granted, in many ways, the challenges that we face are still with us. The pandemic is still with us, but there is light at the end of this tunnel with vaccines on the way and with responsible action taken by individuals.

We will get through this and God is still with us. We've turned the page on a year of challenge, a year of trial, but God has been faithful to us and we have made it through.

[1 : 1 3] You know, as a pastor, there are often times when, as pastors, we need to recognize things that are going on around the world. And obviously we need to pause and recognize the stunning events that happened in the United States Capitol this week.

We recognize the fact that rioters attempted to disrupt a democratic electoral process in the United States. The world watched in shock and horror and disbelief as those events unfolded.

And we certainly never expect violence or bloodshed, particularly in a situation where something relatively peaceful and celebratory and just representative of something that's already taken place is occurring.

So let's take a moment. And I encourage people from our church during this week as the events were unfolding to be in prayer.

But let's take a moment this morning as we open our service to pray about this as well as other things this morning. So let's pray. Lord, we come before you this morning and we recognize you as the creator of the universe.

[2 : 3 6] We recognize that you are also our dearly loving father. Thank you for this new year, Lord. Thank you for 2021. And I pray a blessing over this year for each one of us.

Lord, encourage us. Remind us of the things that we've learned in the past year. Remind us of the ways that you've spoken to us, that you've sought to change our focus, change our perspective.

Lord, grant us resilience in the days ahead, in this new year that we know will still be faced with challenge. And so, Lord, grant us that resilience that we're going to need.

And also, Lord, I pray for hope. We do have hope in you and remind us of that. Remind us of the hope that we have in relationship with you. Lord, we ask you to bring healing to the families and the people who knew the individuals who lost their lives during the course of the events in the U.S. Capitol this week.

Lord, violence took place there. Violence and anarchy. And, Lord, we thank you that in the course of all those events that more damage didn't happen.

[4 : 01] Lord, more lives weren't lost. There seemed to have been even more intent to do greater damage and greater harm. And yet, Lord, that didn't happen. And so, we thank you for that.

Lord, there's so much anger and confusion there. There's so much division and mistrust and disinformation. And so, Lord, we ask you to bring healing.

Lord, we ask you to heal the divisions politically and amongst individuals. Lord, we ask that your will be done there.

Lord, over this next year, we help us to renew our focus. Help us to renew our resolve to seek you.

To live out the example of the words and actions and love that we saw in Jesus. That is so clearly laid out for us in Scripture. The love and the action and the words that Jesus demonstrated as he walked the earth as a human being.

[5 : 05] Lord, help us not to rely on our own strength and willpower. We ask you to transform us by the renewing of our minds through your presence, through your word, and through the power of the Holy Spirit that can and does live within us when we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Lord, in this new year, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you. For you are a good, good Father, and we love you.

And we worship you alone. Lord, while we want your will to be done in the world, we also ask for your will to be done in and through our church this year.

Lord, we ask you to use us in mighty ways to make a difference for people in our lives who may not know you yet.

Lord, make us agents of change in the communities where we live, where we work, and where we play. And we ask all these things in the mighty name of your Son, Jesus Christ.

[6 : 27] Amen. Well, God has proven to be our fortress, our shield, our defender in 2020. He's proven his great promise never to leave us or forsake us.

Even during these dark times, God is and has been with us. And he will continue to be our vision and our guide as we step forward in faith into this new year.

So this morning we're going to join together in worship as we sing three songs. A mighty fortress is our God, blessed assurance, and be thou my vision.

You'll be able to follow those lyrics on the screen for the songs as they appear. And also follow along with the worship leader as he leads us.

So let's sing our praises to our awesome God this morning. Beginning with, a mighty fortress is our God. Bless you as you sing. A mighty fortress is our God.

[7 : 51] A boat would never fade. Our helper, he amid the flood.

Of mortal ills prevailing. But still our ancient foe Does seek to work us war His craft and power are laid And armed with cruel hate On earth is not easy On earth is not easy And though this world with devil's friends Should threaten to undo Should threaten to undo We will not fear for God at once

His truth to triumph through Prince of darkness, Graham We tremble not for him His rage we can endure We know his doom is sure One little word shall fail Blessed assurance Jesus is mine Oh what a foretaste of glory divine

Jesus is mine Oh what a foretaste of glory divine Heir of salvation Purchase of God Born of his spirit Washed in his blood Washed in his blood This is my story This is my song This is my song Praising my Savior All the day long This is my story This is my song This is my song Praising my Savior All the day long Perfect submission

All is at rest I am happy and blessed I am happy and blessed Watching and waiting
Looking above Filled with his love Filled with his goodness Filled with his goodness Lost in
his love This is my story This is my story This is my song This is my song Praising my
Savior All the day long This is my story This is my song Praising my Savior All the day
long Be thou my vision

[12 : 44] O Lord of my heart Not be all else to me Say that thou art Thou my best thought By day or
by night Waking or sleeping Thy presence My life Be thou my wisdom And thou my true
word I ever with thee Thou with me My Lord Thou my great Father

And I thy true Son Thou in me dwelling And I with thee one Thou in me dwelling Thou in
me dwelling Thou a man's empty praise Thou mine inheritance Now and always Thou and
thou only Be first in my heart Hiking of heaven My treasure My treasure Thou won Hiking
of heaven After victory

After victory won May I reach heaven's joys O heaven's heart O heaven's heart Heart of
my own heart Whatever be for Still be my vision Still be my vision O ruler of all Still be my
vision O ruler of all Well I hope you enjoyed That singing this morning It was an
encouragement to me And I hope those words of truth And that beautiful melody

Flowed in and through you It's so great to worship God Not only as we study his word But
in the so many different ways That we can Including prayer And all the other things And
singing is just one of those Great opportunities We have to worship our God Well happy
new year again Happy new year It's a joy for me To be back with you this morning Even in
this way In this virtual way I have a question Has 2021 brought you happiness so far?

Is it a happy new year so far? Well I don't know about you But I Regardless of the year
This year has been particularly applicable to me But I tend to feel a bit sad after Christmas
Because I think I think it's because The warmth and the joy of the Christmas season
Really fills my heart Christmas carols And candlelight And all of these great things Really
focusing on caring for other people It just leaves me feeling a bit melancholy And I find it
hard to say goodbye To that festive feeling every year I really do And as you can see That
way As you can see We still have our Christmas tree up in our home It's been
undecorated But it still has the lights on it And many of the decorations That we have
around our home Have come down But the tree remains up At least for now As a winter
tree This is something new that we've started

[17 : 30] And with that Because we like the warm glow of the lights That allows that season of
Christmas That feeling of Christmas That warmth of Christmas To linger just a bit longer
In a tangible way Like this Does 2021 feel new to you so far?

Have you started maybe some new projects Or identified some new goals That you'd like
to accomplish in your life Or in your work Or in your home Or perhaps in your family even
Some new relationships That you're working on Well that's definitely a tradition For many
people As the new year As the calendar turns over Right?

We set our minds on a new goal Or perhaps we renew our focus On an old goal And we
want to prioritize that We seek to prioritize that In the coming months In the year ahead
New year's resolutions Right?

Some of the most common ones include Well losing weight Or getting into shape Learning
something new Perhaps a new language Or studying something new Eating healthier
Getting out of debt Saving money All of those are different things That people set as goals
At this time of year Some common resolutions Such as spending more time with family Or
traveling Or finding romance even Those, some of them May be affected adversely By the
pandemic Right now Because we can't There are some of those things That are a bit
more restricted Right now And there are even Other resolutions People may recognize
And may seek to Work on this year That have been contributed to Or even caused by the
pandemic People may have started smoking And want to quit Started smoking in the last
year People may

Alcohol may have become A bigger factor In people's lives A lot of statistics Say that people Tend to drink more Sometimes during the holidays In a celebratory way But even more so Under the stress of the pandemic And the unknown And the anxiety of that People turn to things To support them To encourage them And in reality To probably numb The pain of the unknown And then there's also Altruistic Kinds of Resolutions That people choose Like giving more Or Of your time Or things like that Or Or volunteering more Finding a Cause that you care about And contributing your time And your talents To that And Even Some people Even seek to Help others Achieve their goals They commit themselves To that If you If you have a family member

[20 : 35] Who's committed To making a big change In their life Your resolution Your Resolve For the year May be to Support them In theirs Help them achieve Their goals And that's a great Great opportunity As well And one common Resolution Even seems to be Seeking to reduce The stress In our lives Lots of people Talk about that And obviously The pandemic Again May not help With that Right now And it may not Help with the idea Of resolutions Either You may You may think My goodness It's all I can do Right now To get by Day to day Let alone Setting some sort Of lofty goal Like I do Every other year So Where did the idea Of resolutions Come from I've always been Curious about that So I had the opportunity To do some research Why does it seem To live on This idea of Resolutions That's another Question I have And it lives on Despite the fact

That so many people Seem to fail To keep them Right Maybe you're In that group That you January 1st Or even the last Week of December Perhaps you set A goal for yourself And you say I'm going to start And I'm going to Start January 1st And then Gradually January 15th 30th So on Passes And you realize It's not as Important as I thought Or I just Can't make it happen Well based on My research folks We can blame The ancient Babylonians For new year's Resolutions Because the Earliest recorded Celebration Honoring the Coming of the New year Was held Approximately 4,000 years Ago In Babylon And obviously You may know This You may not Calendars Were different Back then So they Actually kicked Things off In late March And that was During the First moon Of the Spring Equinox That was

When they Celebrated Or recognized A new year And these Collective events Were known As the Akitu Festival A-K-I-T-U Akitu Festival Which lasted 11 days And these Celebrations Were specifically Dedicated to The Babylonian Sun god Marduk And maybe You've heard That Maybe you Haven't But if You haven't Happy new Year There's some New learning For you The Babylonian Sun god Marduk But the Babylonian People Actually made Promises To get on The good Side of All their Gods So while This festival Focused on Marduk They were Really all In In terms Of Let's Do Whatever We Can To get On the Good Side of All of Our Gods And They felt That that Would help Them Start off A new Year On the Right Foot By getting On the Good Side of All their Gods And so This early Form of Essentially Resolutions That's what That was

Continued On with The Romans And as You may Know Julius Caesar Decided To consult With his Astronomers And mathematicians And as Rulers Can tend To do He decided To make A change On how Things had Been done In the Past He wanted To put His own Stamp On it So he Introduced Julius Caesar Introduced What is Known as The Julian Calendar And that More closely Represents The modern Calendar That we Use Today So there You go There's Your history Lesson For this Morning And as Part of This change Caesar Declared January 1st To be The start Of the New Year And he Declared That To honor The god Of new Beginnings Whose name Was Janus Do you see The connection Janus Is where We get January Well the Romans Celebrated The new Year By offering Sacrifices To Janus So now

You know Not Janus As in Somebody that You know Who is Lives next Door Janus Janus Janus Janus There you go I'll clarify That for Everyone So now You know The origins Of this Tradition We now Know as The new Year's Resolution But despite That long History Can you Guess How many People Are successful On average In sticking With their Resolutions If we were In person I would Give you An opportunity To guess And I Would Award Church Points Some random Award To the Person who Had the Closest Number Well folks Maybe this Will surprise You But it's Approximately Nine percent Just roughly Nine percent Of people Succeed In achieving Their goals That they set As new Year's Resolutions So it's No wonder Then that The Weight Watchers And fitness Club ads

[25 : 37] Start to Fade out In February And March Because as I alluded To a Moment Ago People Lose Their Inspiration They lose Their Drive To get These Goals Achieved So aside From the Fact that This is My first Sermon Of the New Year Why am I taking Time to Explore The idea Of resolutions And why We don't Stick with Them Is that Just a Convenient Thing that I'm Using as A pastor Well Partly Because it's Timely To be Talking about New Year's Resolutions But part Of why I want Us to look At this Just briefly As we Start our Sermon this Morning Is New Year's Resolutions And our Ability to Stick to Them Generally Relies On What Again I Would ask You out Loud Relies On What Well it Relies Primarily On Willpower Our Personal Ability To Stick to Something And I Believe That Quite Often People

May Set General End Goals For Themselves Without Measurable And Realistically Achievable Steps Along The Way Individual Smaller Goals That Help You Recognize You're Getting There You're Getting It Done Maybe They Don't Even Set Themselves Up With The Tools For Success For Example If You're Trying To Lose Weight And You Have Boxes And Boxes Of Chocolates Left Over For Christmas Not Necessarily The Ideal Circumstances To Achieve Weight Loss Goals Right You're Setting Yourself Up To Fail In Some Ways And Willpower Alone Is Generally Not Enough We Get Bored We Get Frustrated We Get Discouraged When The Going Gets Tough And Ultimately Then We May Give Up Along With 91 Of Other People Who Just Dump Their New Year's Resolutions They Just Let Them

Go We Need Manageable Goals Along The Way We Need Tools To Help Us We Need Support From Others To Encourage Us Because We Recognize That Willpower Alone Generally Won't Cut It And Folks The Same Is True Of Our Spiritual Life If We Seek To Follow God Solely Based On Will Power We Can Become Distracted Discouraged We Can Drift Off Course Have You Ever Laid Down Or Found Some Quiet Time By Yourself Got KnownDER in prayer for others, and the next morning you realize you've drifted off to sleep, right?

It happens to the best of us. But you know what that means when it happens to you, when you drift off course, when you get discouraged? Guess what? It means you're human. It's okay. And you're in good company as well because for centuries Christians have struggled with seeking after God, with desiring a closer relationship with him. We desire it, but then again we seek on willpower alone to try and make it happen, to will it into being.

And as disciples of Christ, we can benefit from some tools and skills that will help us on our journey. So this morning, can you think of a word that sounds awfully similar to the word disciple, which as a follower of Jesus, guess what? That's what you are. A word that's similar to disciple. Hmm. How about discipline? We're launching into a new sermon series now called Spiritual Disciplines Exercising Your Faith. And yes, that is supposed to be cute. Exercising your faith because it's a new year's resolution of sorts. And over the course of the next several weeks, we're going to be exploring the spiritual disciplines that have guided Christians for centuries. And so some of these will be obvious to you, will be familiar to you, will be part of your regular journey, your regular routine, your regular time with God already. And that's great.

[30 : 19] Maybe these are things that you feel you have a good handle on, and that's great too. And others of these may be new to you. And I hope you can begin to see as we explore them, how they may benefit you in your own spiritual journey. Are you familiar? Here's a test. I wish I could do in person.

Are you familiar with the mission statement of our church? Well, I don't want you to Google it because that's cheating. But the mission statement of Bramard Baptist Church is actually the mission statement I believe we have as all followers of Christ. Reaching up to God and reaching out to people.

Reaching up to God, reaching out to people. And over the course of this series, we're going to be exploring some of the practical tools, the disciplines that are available to us as we seek to reach up to God and grow closer to Him. So we're going to begin intentionally plugging into our mission statement as a church. We're going to be looking at that not just as a nice, comfy, comforting set of words, a little phrase. But I want us to remember it. I want us to make it part of our daily lives and our routine as Christians. And part of how we're going to do that is exploring the spiritual disciplines together. How do we know that loving God and seeking Him first, reaching up to God, is our starting point and our anchor as Christians. Well, let's hear the words of Mark chapter 2 verses 36 to 38.

When Jesus was asked by a member of the Pharisees, Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? Jesus replied, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment. Well, we recognize, or maybe you don't know this, but that Pharisee was actually trying to trick Jesus, trying to get Jesus to determine the most important law in the set of laws that the Pharisees followed. They were anchored into, they were legalistic about the laws in Scripture. And Jesus said, well, you know, actually, he walked around that challenge and replied correctly, beautifully, loving God is our number one priority.

[33 : 05] That's what everything else hangs on. So with loving God, with seeking God as our ultimate goal to keep us focused on Him, and on His plan and His will for our lives, with loving Him being the starting point, we're not left to some hopeless pursuit of that goal based solely on willpower.

And perhaps that's an aha moment for you this morning as you hear me say that. That you've been trying to will yourself into a closer relationship with God.

You've been trying to discipline yourself in a vacuum, trying to draw closer and feeling discouraged or distracted or defeated. But when the reward is a deeper connection with God and a closer alignment with His will, hopefully that strikes you as being worth the effort.

Because as a main focus on our introduction to the spiritual disciplines this morning, I want to take some time to look at both what spiritual disciplines aren't, as well as what they are.

So we're not going to dig directly into the disciplines themselves quite yet, but that's to come in weeks ahead. First of all, spiritual disciplines aren't some way to manipulate God.

[34 : 33] They're not some way of saying, okay, Lord, I'll do this if you do this for me. It's not a means of controlling God.

Spiritual disciplines are guides that can help us grow closer to God. They're about us changing and moving towards God. Remember that God loves us whether we practice any spiritual disciplines or not.

He doesn't do something because we act in a certain way or follow a certain rule. He's not measuring us looking for boxes to tick off.

Okay, Pastor Kent did this and good. I love him more. Oh, he did this. I love him less. That's not how it works. Thankfully, that is the grace of God at work.

Second, spiritual disciplines aren't a set of legalistic rules. As that Pharisee asked Jesus, he's looking for Jesus to rank the ways in which we need to follow God and the laws in which we need to follow.

[35 : 38] Spiritual disciplines are not a legalistic set of rules, as I said. They are ways of opening ourselves up to God or focusing on him. And they're not hard and fast rules that must be followed.

They're tools to help us, not rules to bind us. I just made that up. I hope you like it. In fact, other than prayer and studying scripture, it seems that there are a range of opinions.

I've done quite a bit of reading on it as to how many disciplines there actually are. And some of them over the coming weeks may be unfamiliar to you, as I said. So we're going to explore some, but there is really, depending on whose opinion you seek, there's not an exhaustive list of them.

Third, the disciplines we'll explore together over the course of this series are not magic. They're not somehow a be-all and end-all solution.

If you do X, Y, and Z, you will have a perfect walk with Jesus. Not a chance. That's not how it works. Because we've learned from Christians over the centuries, we would argue that people like Mother Teresa or the Apostle Paul or other folks over the course of history have had the kind of relationship with God that we perceive we could never possibly have.

[37 : 08] And yet, I want you to recognize that those same people constantly felt like they didn't achieve it. Like they were still working towards a relationship with God.

So perfection is not what we're looking for. We're looking for intention and a change of heart and a desire to move towards God using tools that are available to us.

So they're not magic tools. They're not going to solve all your problems. Folks, I want us to remember that God is always closer to us than we can ever possibly imagine.

And that doesn't change. Nothing that we do or don't do, and I've said this to you before many times, nothing we do or do not do will make God love us any more or any less.

Hear that as truth. All of this, the Christian life, is about our focus on God. It's our focus on Him, not the other way around.

[38 : 19] And these disciplines aren't simply boxes that we've checked off to make us feel better or make us feel closer to God just because we do them, although that may be a positive byproduct.

It's not about the disciplines alone. It's about how the disciplines help us draw closer to God. And as James 4 reminds us, I'll let you read that chapter on your own, but James 4 reminds us in great detail that we need to examine our own hearts and motives as we seek God.

What is our desire to deepen our relationship with God? What does that come out of? And is it the right motivation? Is it the right heart to have? So now knowing what spiritual disciplines are not, then what are they?

What are they actually all about? Well, first, spiritual disciplines are a practice. We practice them as a way of putting ourselves before God.

All these things we're going to look at are practices. And as believers who have accepted Jesus as the Lord of our lives, God lives in us through the Holy Spirit.

[39 : 37] And we separate ourselves from God by our actions, not by His. It's our actions that distance us from God.

Our sinful choices, our selfish choices that distance us from God. Nothing that God has done. God has not pulled away. If you are feeling distanced from God or distant from God, it's important, folks, to examine your own heart.

Because God never left you. It's the other way around. When we pray, when we meditate, when we receive communion, when we read Scripture, we're putting ourselves in a place where we can connect more deeply with God.

And by putting ourselves in His presence in intentional ways, we can receive healing and be renewed as God forms us more into the likeness and character of Jesus.

Doesn't that sound exciting? That's what sanctification is all about. We accept Jesus as the Lord of our lives and our Savior, but that's not the end of the journey.

[40 : 55] It's the beginning. And spiritual practices, spiritual disciplines, help us to put ourselves in an intentional way before God, recognizing who He is and growing closer to Him, opening the opportunities for us to interact with Him on a more deep level.

So second, spiritual disciplines aren't something someone just made up one day. They're not something that some great political leader, some great motivational speaker one day said, you know what a Christian should do?

A Christian should do these things. Here's your top 10 list of things that will draw you closer to God. No, spiritual disciplines are biblical. Matthew 6 talks about prayer and fasting.

Acts 6 talks about serving others. 2 Timothy chapter 3 and many other places in the Bible talk about reading scripture. James 5 speaks about the importance of confession.

Acts 4 reminds us of the importance of simplicity. So we'll be exploring these disciplines. And so you didn't need to be speed writing. That's not the list.

[42 : 14] But we're going to be looking at some of those disciplines as well as a few others over the course of this series. Third, spiritual disciplines are historical.

The church has been practicing them since the very beginning. And obviously, many of them, as I noted, are mentioned in scripture. The writings of the early church fathers, early church leaders, Augustine, John Chrysostome, John Cassian, Irenaeus.

If some of those names may be familiar, some may not. But there are also others. Those folks, as well as others, have referred to the spiritual disciplines and how they have shaped their personal journeys.

Later teachers, such as Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis de Salle. Those folks also referred to disciplines and how they incorporated them into their own lives.

These are not new. These are very, very old. And they are reliable. We'll learn more about this through the course of our series. But also, I want you to hear this.

[43 : 24] Not every discipline is necessarily suited to every person. Now, some may draw close to God through spending time in prayer for others, intercessory prayer.

Others may prefer silent meditation, being off on their own for extended periods of time to be alone with God. Others may spend hours reading their Bible. So, I recognize that some of you may hear some of these and say, yuck, that's not me at all.

I could never do that. But that's okay because there are other tools, there are other disciplines which may already resonate with you. Or you may learn about some in the course of this series that you can try that may help you as well.

And for me personally, if you're wondering, I find that being alone and listening to worship music is very effective for me to connect with God.

Spending time in nature as well. When we're out in the mountains, it's one of my favorite places because my spirit is filled and I feel close to God. And just as our God is infinitely creative, He created each of us as unique individuals.

[44 : 39] And as we are uniquely created, we uniquely connect with God in different ways, through different means and different styles and different disciplines.

Folks, my prayer is that the spiritual disciplines we'll explore together in this series will encourage you in the ways that you already connect with God.

Perhaps they'll help, this series will help you identify some new things that you can explore. And as well, I hope that you'll be able to gain an appreciation for the styles and activities that you recognize in others that may not necessarily resonate with you, but you'll come to recognize and appreciate them.

My friends, disciplines and discipleship are not solely about personal drive and willpower. They're about tools and they're about training.

We have the example of generations of believers who have come before us. People who have sought to draw nearer to God in different ways.

[45 : 52] We don't seek to follow God in a vacuum. I want you to recognize that. And it is not a solo journey. Absolutely, you're looking to develop a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

But at the same time, you don't walk this journey alone. You're not forced in a vacuum to try and figure it out yourself. With this in mind, our benediction this morning comes from Hebrews 12.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out before us.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Yes, my friends, we are in training, but we're also on this journey together.

[47 : 18] We're going to explore this together, the spiritual disciplines, and we're going to do it as a team. My friends, go in peace.

May your week be filled with the encouragement and joy of God as you seek his face. God bless you.