

Practising Spiritual Disciplines

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] When you become a Christian, when you make a decision to follow Jesus, something supernatural happens.

The presence of the Holy Spirit enters you. Becoming a Christian, growing as a Christian is not some obscure, esoteric spiritual experience.

It's a simple but profound knowledge of God's presence. And the Holy Spirit who takes occupancy in your life when you follow Jesus, that is the same Spirit that raises Jesus from the dead and who will raise us from the dead.

It's a Spirit whose knowledge is unique. It is the Spirit who reveals the wisdom of God to you.

It is the Holy Spirit who will inspire you and motivate you to serve others. And it is the same Holy Spirit who will give you the mind of Christ.

[1 : 32] So if we're really serious about all this and we genuinely want to grow in all of this, we've got to tend to that relationship.

It doesn't just happen. And that's where spiritual discipline, and perhaps that might sound like a bit of a harsh term, but it's where it's so important.

I'm going to unpack that a little bit this morning as to why it's important. Make some allusion to some of the disciplines, but more want to think about what it means to have that posture of being disciplined.

And I think it's a really helpful quotation from Eugene Peterson. I'm going to bring it up on the screens now. I want you to really soak this up. Eugene Peterson said, Worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God.

He went on to say that if we don't interrupt ourselves regularly, we have no chance of attending to God at all, at all other times and at all other places.

[3 : 07] In 2007, the Washington Post carried out a social experiment. One Friday morning in January during rush hour, a violin player came out to busk in a subway in Washington.

Nothing that unusual about that. What was different about this particular busker is his name is Joshua Bell, considered by many to be one of the greatest violinists on the planet.

Several nights before, he was playing in the same city to an auditorium packed with people paying hundreds of dollars to hear him play.

But in this experiment, he just turned up unannounced, on the subway, wearing jeans, sweatshirt and a baseball cap. Oh, and a \$3.5 million Stradivarius violin.

There were hidden cameras tucked away, and he stood there and played for 45 minutes.

Afterwards, the footage was analysed.

[4 : 25] 1,097 people walked past. You could count on one hand the number of people who stood for a moment to listen.

He had a few dollars thrown into his violin case. There was the odd one or two who stood and lingered for a while.

One individual who really did seem to pay attention. And one toddler who seemed to be tugging on his mum, desperately wanting to stop. But other than that, they just passed by.

What happened in that experiment? Well, it's difficult to prove empirically, but it's reckoned, it's theorised. The big difference was simply context.

You don't expect it. In the same way, there was a work of art, a painting, I can't remember who it was by now, but it was worth, it was valued at tens of millions of dollars on display in a gallery.

[5 : 34] The staff took the painting off the wall, which people flocked to see. They took it off the wall, and during one lunchtime, they carefully took it out from its frame, and they hung it on the wall at the cafe of the museum, where this work of art is usually on display.

They put it on the wall with a price tag of \$50. Nobody inquired. It's context. You don't expect that extraordinary thing to happen.

Which raises the question, why don't we expect it? Well, because our senses are dulled by the ordinariness of life. We become, to use Eugene Peterson's word again, preoccupied with the self. With those things that weigh us down, with our circumstances, with the things that bring us worry, or anxiety, or fear. Whether it's over the past, or over the future, or what we're going through right now. But because these things take over, and because we become preoccupied by them, we need to interrupt that.

[6 : 59] We need to stop and listen, and pay attention to that music that is playing. We need to stand and watch, and soak up that great work of art that is before us.

But most importantly, we need to pay attention to the presence of the living God, who is present within us. The living Holy Spirit, who raises Jesus from the dead.

The same Holy Spirit, who will raise you and I from the dead for all eternity. The Holy Spirit, who brought us into existence, and sustains the life of the universe.

That Holy Spirit, who promises, is not just with you, and around you, but inside you. That's what discipline is about.

Not a clip round the ear. But that loving invitation from the Lord who loves us, just wants us to know, desperately, that he's there. The strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves, and attend to that presence of God.

[8 : 18] So what might be some of those disciplines, then, in practice? Well, there is no biblical definitive list.

We can, obviously, we derive these things from scripture, but there's no set list, and neither in classic theology. There have been many, many tomes that have been written about what the disciplines are.

John Mark Comer's book, which we've been using as the basis for our current series, he mentions nine, but there's no definitive list. I just want to draw on four examples.

Prayer, reading the Bible, solitude, and community. not to unpack them in any depth and detail, because we can't do that in just a few minutes, but it's helpful for us just to revisit those as examples, just to give us a bit of an idea, a focus as to what we're talking about here when we talk about interrupting our preoccupation with ourselves and tending to the presence of God.

Let's take prayer as an example. Prayer, we so often, we've had this said billions of times, haven't we, but we think of prayer as asking God for things, and it is that, but that's not fundamentally what it's about.

[9 : 50] It's about relationship, it's about connection, it's about listening to God in any relationship with anybody. That relationship means nothing if it's just asking that other for things.

Most fundamentally, it's a state of being. And it's about listening, and listening to God is something that doesn't perhaps always come naturally or easily, and so it may mean that we have to actually set aside a time and discipline ourselves.

Say, I'm going to do this. I'm going to do this. I'm going to listen. And there's no sort of formulaic way of doing that, other than perhaps getting ourselves into a physical posture that is intentional, in other words, without other things running around, putting all electronic devices out of the way. Maybe closing our eyes. Don't have to. Just simply waiting for a few minutes, Lord. I'm listening. I'm all yours. The point is, it's not just to focus that at one point, but if we can get into the habit of doing that on a regular basis, so it opens up the soul for the whole of the rest of the day to see God when we're not expecting him to turn up in those conversations and in those situations, to cultivate that nurture of expectancy and readiness to hear him speak.

Bible reading is really closely connected with that. And I've said before, you know, Bible reading, I think we miss the point if we think it's something we've got to do and speed read in order to do it.

[11 : 34] We need to kind of get through as much as possible as we can in shorter time as possible. Because if we put the emphasis on quantity there, then we're missing it.

You see, when we read the Bible, when we read Scripture, we're not just reading an old book. We're reading God's living word. And that same Holy Spirit that inspired the word of God as it was written all of those years ago, it's the same Holy Spirit that can take those words and speak to us and speak into us today.

And I would always encourage people that it's far better to actually keep less is more and actually to keep the focus on a few verses but to really open up to God in those moments to speak to us through Scripture.

Personally, although we're all different, I find this particularly helpful early on in the day. I find it a helpful thing to start the day before all of those, as C.S. Lewis put it, all those words, all those other thoughts come crashing at us like a herd of wild animals.

And I also, and I don't know where this came from but I came across it not that long ago where somebody said Scripture before screens. Before you grab your phone or your iPad or whatever it is that's going to bombard you with messages and tell you all the things that have got to happen, don't let that start your day.

[13:09] So we've got Scripture as well as listening. But then two other things, two other examples perhaps of, you know, interrupting our preoccupation with ourselves.

One is solitude. Taking some time to actually put yourself on your own away from others. Now, depending on our personality type, some of us will find that actually the sort of place that gives us a warm glow just thinking about.

Others will be terrified of the thought of solitude. And perhaps it becomes more of a discipline the harder it cuts against what is our natural inclinations. But it's an important thing to get that time with God on our own and to listen and to still ourselves.

But at the same time, this is why it's worth mentioning hand in hand with solitude, is community. Because there will be other personality types that will find actually the thought of meeting with others terrifying.

there will be others that will feel actually, you know, I find actually time alone, that's what I like. I find that's my comfort zone. But the thought of actually joining together even with just a small group of others, I find that quite difficult.

[14:23] But again, it's through others, not just ourselves in isolation, that God can and does speak to us. If you're not part of a home group, have a conversation. Carolyn's here, isn't she? Carolyn, where are you?

Sorry, I didn't warn you. Carolyn, could you stand up? Carolyn is our home group coordinator here. And yeah, so if you'd like to join a home group, if you're not, no, in fact, let me rephrase that.

If you don't like the thought of joining a home group, it terrifies you. But listening to this right now, you're thinking, do you know what though? I hear what you're saying and I perhaps need to break out of my bubble and meet with some other people.

We're not talking big numbers, that's why we call them small groups. But if you're thinking actually perhaps that's the time I do that, have a word with Carolyn. But the point with all of these things is not to sort of just deliberately inflict psychological pain on ourselves.

That's not what we're talking about when we use the word discipline. Rather, it is about recognising that there are some things that may not, we may not feel like doing.

[15:23] They don't come naturally. But we need to do these things if we are serious about tending to that relationship with God. You know, that's true again in all relationships that actually we need to do things from time to time that we don't feel like doing.

That in fact if we don't do those things then the relationship breaks right down. There are times when we have to say sorry in relationships and we don't feel like it.

There are times when we may not feel or remember like saying thank you. We need to do it. There are times that gratitude is a good example here because thankfulness is really at the core of the spirituality that we see Paul talking about in the New Testament.

And he talks about giving thanks in all circumstances. Not because of all circumstances but in all circumstances. Which is why we find him even writing from chains in prison saying actually remember to give thanks all the time.

His letters open up so I give thanks every time I think of you. He's talking about thanksgiving all of the time and yet here was a man who was beaten for his faith who was persecuted for his faith who was put in prison for his faith.

[16:37] Thankfulness something that doesn't always may not feel like doing but when we discipline ourselves to do it we find then that thankfulness becomes nurtured. There's a story about two guys walking across a field and there was a bull which they didn't know when they entered the field.

But then they looked across and they saw this huge great big animal and it was starting to come towards them. They began to walk a bit faster and so did the bull. And so they began to run and as they ran so did the bull and one of them said to the other I think I know we don't do this but we need to pray can you say a prayer out loud now?

And the other one is getting out of breath running said I don't pray out loud. He said no but you went to a Christian school years ago you told me that they used to force you to pray out loud in assemblies. He said yeah that was years ago.

Well you must be able to remember something. So he paused for a moment and thought the first prayer he could remember and he shouted out Lord for what we are about to receive make us truly grateful. Circumstances don't always make us feel particularly thankful.

That's what discipline is about. Even when everything within us is resisting the need, the urge, the feeling, the emotional state of thankfulness. Sometimes we've got to dig deep and make that effort to work out that salvation with trembling and fear.

[18 : 05] Remember it's not about earning salvation, that's already a gift. But the presence of the living God that is already there that just calls us to make ourselves aware.

strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation of ourselves and attend to the presence of God. As we come to pray in just a moment I just want to draw attention to a particular thing we find in scripture and you may have heard me talk about this before but I've talked about it quite a bit because I think it's quite important, very important.

Paul in his letters uses a pair of phrases over and over again in different places where he talks about putting things on and putting things off, taking things off.

It's an image we encounter over and over again and the reason I want to draw attention to it now is it has everything to do with that theme of discipline. When we don't feel like praying, or giving thanks or reading scripture or community or solitude or whatever it is we're talking about, we don't feel about it, it cuts, we don't feel like it, then we are called, well, to get on and do it, to put it on.

And Paul uses that phrase in different forms over and over again where he talks about putting on the new self and taking off the old, Ephesians 4. And Colossians 3 talks about putting on love, clothe yourselves, clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness and gentleness and patience.

[19 : 46] Things that might not come instinctively or naturally at that moment in time. But he says you've got to take this on, you've got to put it on. It might not wear that comfortably right now but you've got to put it on and take off some of the stuff that you need to take off.

Putting on Christian character, it goes against our natural inclinations but when we do so we grow. Again in Ephesians 6 and in Romans 13 Paul talks about putting on the armour of God.

Armour, I've never worn it but I imagine it's not that comfortable. You get used to it, you grow into it. And that's the image that we find in Paul when he talks about clothing the self, putting on these things of God.

It doesn't come naturally maybe at first, sometimes it does but it doesn't always. But it will. Because when you practice discipline, after a while it becomes part of you, you grow into it.

And this is Paul's vision of what it is to truly flourish as a human being. God meets you where you are but he doesn't leave you there because he has a vision that you might not see yet and might be difficult to understand or even believe but that you can and you will grow and grow and grow.

[20 : 59] And this is a lifelong experience into the Christ shaped person that God longs for us to be. You can always tell when it's early September in Clevedon.

If you go through Clevedon, the middle of Clevedon, at about quarter past eight to quarter past nine in the morning, the school's just starting up. And you see all the year sevens walking to school, very enthusiastically or not, in their new blazers, which generally come down to the knee and beyond, almost down to the fingertips.

And you know that it won't be that long before those blazers, well, they won't shrink. They'll be grown into. Those young people grow very quickly and they grow into those things in which they've been clothed.

When Paul talks about clothing the self, putting on these new things, he has this vision that there are things of God, things of the Holy Spirit that we can and we will grow into.

But this is a lifelong process. It doesn't matter how long we've been followers of Jesus, we're still in that process of growing into that salvation which is already ours.

[22 : 17] The strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with the self and attend to the presence of God. God's love.

Remember, faith in Jesus is not about doing, it's about being. But when you tend to that being in him, you start doing stuff. But sometimes we have to start doing stuff in order for that being to grow. And that's what we mean when we're talking about spiritual discipline. Let's pray. Lord, thank you. Thank you that you love us, that you are here with us, that you are among us. Thank you that following you is not just something that we do with our heads.

It's not just a decision that we're going to believe something, but it's entering into a relationship by which your Holy Spirit enters us.

[23 : 30] Lord, we're sorry for when we have not tended to that reality, when we have just gone through preoccupied with ourselves. Lord, forgive us. Lord, thank you that when we confess the reality of our brokenness and our sin, that you forgive us, you are there ready, longing to restore us.

And we pray that right now. Come, Holy Spirit. As we continue in conversation here this morning, and when we leave this place eventually, we may know that your Spirit goes with us, not just with us, but within us.

Lord, we thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen.