

Pursuing Holiness through Spiritual Growth

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DMIN815 – Personal Spiritual Formation

December 2023

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Introduction

Spiritual growth in the modern Christian's life is a journey that will last a lifetime. They will be imperfect beings until believers have passed through this life into glory. Thankfully, through God's grace, believers are no longer held captive to the law when they accept Jesus (cf. Romans 7:6). However, this does not mean that the believer will no longer struggle with their sin; it just means that the blood of Jesus will cover them. The life of a believer is punctuated by a series of highs and lows that remind them of their need for a savior and should motivate them to live a life in a way that is good and pleasing to God: "For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven't stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God." (Colossians 1:9-10, HCSB). Therefore, spiritual growth and formation are lifelong processes that should point the believer to various disciplines to aid them during this lifetime.

Spiritual Disciplines as a Means of Godliness

Believers often find themselves in a unique situation. They are told that Jesus loves them no matter what they do and that nothing can take them away from that love (cf. John 10:28). However, once a believer understands how much they are loved and scratches the surface of how deep that love is, they feel like they are instantly not enough to deserve it. The crux of this is that a believer with a renewed heart desires to feel worthy of the love poured on them. Through the love of God, believers understand that the good things they do are not a way to earn love but

rather an expression of that love¹. In a basic understanding, spiritual disciplines are scripture-based tools that can aid believers in their quest for growth.

The Basics of Spiritual Discipline

Christians understand that their faith is not based on their own works but on the Holy Spirit working in them:” For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift – not from works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9, HCSB). The daily activities of life are unfulfilling and can make growth difficult, but this does not mean that there is no value in learning spiritual discipline. There are many books, journals, guides, etc. that provide examples of spiritual growth plans, but for this author’s assessment, the focus of this document will be the disciplines of Love God, Seek God, Trust God, and Share God.

Explaining the Disciplines

Love God is the first and most important discipline guiding believers toward godliness. Jesus even specifies this when he spoke to his disciples in the Gospels: “He said to them, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command.” (Matthew 22:37-38, HCSB). The love of God is a gift that is freely given to believers. Not only is it a gift, but it is a spiritual discipline that God pours on believers, even when they are far from God (cf. 1 John 4:19). If God’s love for his children comes so easily to Him, surely it should come easily for a believer.

¹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014),

Seeking God is almost as important as the first discipline. This is because mankind was created with an innate desire to seek after their creator². Even before a man was formed in their mother's womb, they were known by God (cf. Jeremiah 1:5). God actively seeks His children because He desperately wants to have a relationship with them. At first glance, it seems strange to think that a believer must seek after their creator, but it makes more sense if one thinks about this from a human perspective. If a child is born into this world by their parent and that parent is either dead or unknown to them, at some point, they will desire to seek their parent³. Therefore, it follows that when believers Seek God, it will draw them closer to God (increasing their godliness).

When believers learn to Trust God, they take the first active step toward their relationship with God. Trusting the unknown is something that mankind finds challenging. In much the same way as adopted children, especially those adopted by a parent who was previously unknown to them, may find it difficult to trust their parent, so do Christians to trust God. Yet, the Bible explains that all believers who are covered in Christ's blood, are adopted into God's family: "He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ for Himself, according to His favor and will," (Ephesians 1:5, HCSB). As all believers are adopted into the family of God, they must learn to trust the Father who loves them. Through God's perfect love, believers learn to trust Him, drawing them ever closer to their Father.

Finally, believers should desire to Share God as part of their devotion to their Heavenly Father. In this fourth discipline, the believer has already reached a new level in their journey because they have been so focused on God that they want to share this love with others. After all,

²C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 57

³ Sara Docan-Morgan, "Discursive struggles in "real" families: Korean adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth family reunions," *Family Relations* 71, no. 2 (2022): 544.

what is the purpose of knowing such an amazing love if one keeps it to themselves? This is not how God expects his believers to behave (cf. Romans 1:16). By sharing their faith, a believer is stepping out and doing what is needed to illustrate God's expectations for them. With each choice a believer makes considering God's mercy, they better illustrate godliness.

Assessment Results

The author of this document previously created an assessment based on the Likert scale to determine the spiritual state of their respondents. Based on the six responses from the author's pool of friends, it seems that many of them are in a healthier spiritual state than the author had anticipated, but there is still work to be done. After the details of the assessment results have been explained, the author will provide a growth plan with methods to increase discipline in each of the four areas mentioned above (Love God, Seek God, Trust God, Share God).

Love God Results

The results of the assessment for the first Mark of a Disciple are outlined below:

A1: Mark One – Love God

	Mark 1.1	Mark 1.2	Mark 1.3	Mark 1.4	Mark 1.5
R1	5	5	5	5	5
R2	5	5	5	5	5
R3	5	5	5	5	4
R4	5	5	5	5	3
R5	5	5	4	5	3
R6	4	4	4	4	2
Average	4.83	4.83	4.17	4.67	3.67

4

Based on the material expressed in the above data from the assessment, most of the respondents feel that their outward expression of loving God is solid. One interesting thing of note, however, is that many of the respondents struggled with feeling close to God regularly (the fifth statement in this section states: “I feel close to God on a daily basis.”). For the sake of growth, it seems that this is an area that the growth plan should include guidance for.

Seek God Results

The second area in this assessment, Seek God, shows the following results:

⁴ David Shields, personal screenshot, “Mark of a Disciple Number One.” December 10, 2023

A2: Mark Two – Seek God

	Mark 2.1	Mark 2.2	Mark 2.3	Mark 2.4	Mark 2.5
R1	5	5	5	5	5
R2	5	5	5	5	5
R3	5	5	5	5	5
R4	5	4	4	5	4
R5	5	4	4	5	3
R6	3	3	4	4	3
Average	4.67	4.33	4.50	4.83	4.17

5

As illustrated by the material above, the respondents on the second mark of a disciple scored quite high overall. In this data selection, none of the respondents scored any lower than a “3” on these reviews. However, similarly to the previous section, the lowest scoring item in this section was the final statement: “I enjoy time spent with others learning about God.” Therefore, the customized growth plan should also include material to guide believers in this area.

Trust God Results

As mentioned earlier, the third item – Trust God – is the first item wherein the believer must make an active step. The results of this section can be found below:

⁵ David Shields, personal screenshot, “Marks of a Disciple Number Two.” December 10, 2023

A3: Mark Three – Trust God

	Mark 3.1	Mark 3.2	Mark 3.3	Mark 3.4	Mark 3.5
R1	5	5	5	5	5
R2	5	4	5	5	5
R3	5	4	5	5	5
R4	4	4	4	5	5
R5	4	4	4	5	5
R6	4	3	3	5	3
Average	4.5	4	4.33	5	4.67

6

The respondents' ability to Trust God seems noticeably higher, especially in the fourth statement. In fact, in this instance, all the respondents voted a “5,” which is the highest score that can be selected on this scale. The lowest score in this area seems to focus on statement 2 in this section: “I am not afraid of what may happen in life because I know God is in control.” In an unusual deviation, the statement that scored lowest in this section parallels the question that scored the highest. To help facilitate the personal growth of respondents, it seems sensible to use these comparisons for analysis.

Share God Results

In the final section of the material, the believer is asked to focus on one of the most challenging disciplines – Share God. The results of this section are outlined below:

⁶ David Shields, personal screenshot, “Marks of a Disciple Number Three.” December 10, 2023

A4: Mark Four – Share God

	Mark 4.1	Mark 4.2	Mark 4.3	Mark 4.4	Mark 4.5
R1	5	5	5	5	5
R2	5	5	4	5	5
R3	4	5	3	4	5
R4	4	4	3	3	5
R5	4	4	3	2	4
R6	3	3	3	1	3
Average	4.17	4.33	3.5	3.33	4.5

7

The discipline required to Share God can prove to be the most challenging discipline for many believers because of the social aspect inherent in sharing one’s faith. Even though humans are social creatures, the many interpersonal requirements to share anything – especially something as personal as one’s faith – is a challenging demand. To make matters worse, the challenge of sharing becomes even more intense when one considers the social and political ramifications of sharing religious beliefs depending on the society in which the believer lives. In the material presented, the lowest score is item 4: “I am a social person who likes to talk to others.” This indicates that the believer needs to be given guidance on how to handle this challenge. Answering this and the other items mentioned previously is the direction this document now turns.

⁷ David Shields, personal screenshot, “Marks of a Disciple Number Four,” December 10, 2023.

Customized Growth Plan

The spiritual walk of a believer is something that will last the believer's entire life⁸. No one will be perfected until the day that Christ comes (cf. 1 John 5:20). Thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the believer does not have to worry about falling away from God, but on the contrary, their heart should desire to do the good things to give glory to God. Even so, it is not easy for humans in a fallen world to grow. The enemy will constantly seek to poison the growth of the believer to prevent them from doing all the great things God has planned for them. To this end, the author will now guide the believer on how to react and grow in each of the areas previously mentioned (Love God, Seek God, Trust God, Share God) with a focus on the areas with the lowest scores in each section.

Growing in Love

Faith is not a set of tasks, a religious pursuit, or a scale upon which to be weighed. On the contrary, faith is a relationship. In fact, the relationship between God and His creation could almost be considered a "Divine Romance" in light of God's touch on man's life⁹. God, Himself, is a being of love: "And we have come to know and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him." (1 John 4:16, HCSB). To Love God, one must reconcile with the fact that no matter how passionate or innocent their earthly love is or was, it is infinitesimal compared to God's love. From before one took their first breath, the Heavenly Father, Creator of All, loved them and loves them deeply

⁸ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 296

⁹ Gene Edwards, *The Divine Romance*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), 5

and intimately. But due to the stressors of this life or to the flimsy and poorly articulated love of incomplete people, love is not always an easy thing to increase.

How, then, can a human hope to grow in love? To do so requires mankind to set aside their shallow understanding of love. No matter the human's failings, temper, appearance, or speech ability, God can use them. The trouble lies in accepting their faults and allowing God to remake them into something better. Simply put, man is their own obstacle to grasping God's love for them¹⁰. If there is any doubt about this, one can simply look at some of the great heroes of the Bible: King David, God's Beloved, was an adulterer and murderer (cf. 2 Samuel 11:4, 2 Samuel 11:14); Moses, one of the greatest leaders of Israel feared public speaking (cf. Exodus 4:10); and Paul was responsible for the imprisonment (and perhaps death) of many Christians (cf. Acts 9:1-2). Despite the less-than-extraordinary traits of these people, God loved them all and used them all to do His work. Humans only understand love naturally by watching the love they receive from their parents, peers, or romantic partners. But all these love expressions pale compared to the purity and intensity of God's love. Through the love of God, the believers draw closer to God.

When reviewing the responses to this author's assessment, the lowest score in Love God was related to the respondent not feeling close to God daily. The issue here can be relegated to the relationship one has with God. A relationship is not a one-way passage (or at least a healthy relationship is not). From the human perspective, a relationship will not be prosperous if it is one-sided. If one were to claim they were friends (or lovers) with another person, but they do not engage in conversations with this person, there is no way for that relationship to grow. Certainly,

¹⁰ Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015), 53.

the two may stay in a relationship of sorts, but it will never grow. If one met with the same person once a week for many years but only sat and stared at the person, it is doubtful that either party would say they felt close to the other person. Even if one party only sat and listened to the other person talk about themselves (analogous to a Christian just listening to a sermon every Sunday and nothing else), they might learn about the person but would likely not consider themselves close to that person.

In the Christian walk, the simplest way to feel close to God is to converse with Him as often as possible. This can take on many forms, including prayer, meditation, or reading of the Word ¹¹. When one engages with one (or hopefully all) of these means to communicate with God, they will surely see their relationship grow and improve. The best instructions would be for the believer to spend dedicated time (daily or weekly) trying to communicate with God through these various methods for a pre-determined period (maybe weekly reading of the Gospels for a month, for example) and ask how they now feel about their closeness to God. One cannot expect a relationship to be close if no time or effort is invested in that relationship.

The Dedicated Pursuit

As expressed previously, the second spiritual discipline, Seek God, is something that comes from God. God relentlessly pursues His children and will do so as long as they live. From an earthly point of view, if two people have found their way to a sprawling forest and engage in a lively game of ‘hide and seek’, the chances of one finding the other might seem equal. But, if one of the people decides they want to make it difficult to be found, or perhaps does not realize the other is seeking them to begin with, the potential of being found will be skewed.

¹¹ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 12.

Furthermore, if one person not only does not want to be found but also cannot understand the language of the one seeking them, the chances of being found further decrease. Certainly, one could exacerbate this analogy to wilder and broader contexts, but the answer is the same – to seek God, one must look for God.

The believer's life should be punctuated with pursuing God in whatever ways they find possible. Using the analogy mentioned previously, if one is trying to seek out another, one needs to be able to communicate with that person in a language that both understand. Additionally, both parties must earnestly desire to seek each other. It is already clear that God seeks his children throughout their entire lives (cf. Matthew 18:10-14), so if the believer is not being "found" by God, it is certainly not from God's lack of trying. God does not hide Himself from the believer (barring a few cases where God hid Himself to prove a point), so if the believer is not finding God, they are not seeking Him in an active way. To further elaborate on the analogy, if God is patiently waiting in the forest for the believer to come to Him, but the believer is not calling out, "God! Where are you?" and then listening for God's response, it is doubtful that the believer is seeking God wholeheartedly.

The simplest way to increase the capacity for seeking God in the individual believer is for them to learn new ways to seek Him or spend time improving the ways they already seek Him. In this way, pointing them to the communication methods discussed previously in the Love God section of this document would increase their capacity. However, the responses from the survey did not suggest any issue with the individual pursuit of God; rather, they focused on the lack of interest in learning about God with other believers. Much like learning material in a classroom

setting, people learn more when collaborating with their peers¹². This can also be found in scripture: "...not staying away from our worship meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:25, HCSB). Those who do not enjoy learning with others should take the opportunity to review a particular piece of scripture on their own and then review the same piece with other believers. Upon completion of this action, the value of hearing other perspectives on the material should make it clear that there is considerable value in doing so. Human minds are egregiously self-centered when they are left to their own devices, but the ability to communicate with others allows humans to grow by seeking different perspectives. Of course, for this to succeed, the believer must also be willing to accept other perspectives. Much like learning to Love God, believers seeking God must participate in the activity if they hope to grow.

The Dichotomy of Trust

As one begins to study the third discipline – Trust God – the change from passive to active engagement becomes apparent. No longer is the work done solely by God and gracefully extended to the believer for acceptance or not. In this situation, the believer must actively trust God – what most would call “taking a step of faith.” As Peter boldly stated to Jesus on the Sea of Galilee, “Lord, if it’s You,” Peter answered Him, “command me to come to You on the water.” Come! He said...” (Matthew 14:28-29a, HCSB). Now, as the story progresses, Peter does take the step but eventually finds his faith is not as powerful as he thought. But the point of this story is not that Peter eventually sank under the waves and had to be saved by Jesus; rather, it is that

¹² Jun-Min Ye and Jin Zhou, “Exploring the relationship between learning sentiments and cognitive processing in online collaborative learning: A network analytic approach.” *The Internet and Higher Education* 55 (2022): 2.

Peter took the step of faith in the first place. Peter had enough faith in his Savior to trust Jesus to let him walk on the water.

The potential of a believer witnessing a manifestation of the Holy Spirit telling them to take up barefoot wakeboarding in the modern world is quite slim (though never zero). Without Jesus' physical presence in the world, learning to trust him with one's life will naturally be challenging. After all, the biblical definition of faith is trusting something that cannot be seen or easily grasped (cf. Hebrews 11:1). From a very young age, humans are taught to learn about their world by engaging with it (think of an infant learning to pick up a block for the first time). When one can see or sense a physical object, trusting that the object is, in fact, present is not challenging at all. However, when one steps outside on a day with a light breeze, the same solution does not work. Humans can "feel" the wind as it glides over them, but they cannot see it. Yet if the same human looks around them, they cannot *see* the wind. They can see the evidence of the wind as it dances over trees or causes leaves to rustle, but they must accept that the wind exists without seeing its manifestation.

In this way, when a believer makes the first steps to trust in God and then sees the results of this trust, their faith will be increased. But what if the results of their faith are not visible for a long time? Perhaps they have been praying for a dear friend to be healed from an illness that is ravaging the friend's body. They may pray fervently for weeks and never see a change in the friend's health. But God's results are rarely instantaneous. In the Bible, the Israelites were delivered from Egypt and promised a safe land to call their own – Canaan. However, due to their lack of faith in God, they were forced to wander in the wilderness for 40 years – well beyond the average lifespan of many of the people when the trip began. Ultimately, the descendants of those

first freed Jewish people did arrive in the promised land, but not until most of the original generations had died out.

Interestingly, in the assessment results, all respondents scored “God always does what He says He will do in my life, even if it takes a while” the highest possible score (5), but then scored “I am not afraid of what may happen in life because I know God is in control” lower overall. This produces an interesting dichotomy that is worth noting. The respondents had no issues specifying that God always delivers on His promises but were less certain that they could trust their future to God. This seems to agree that although believers have seen God work in the past, they are still not fully sure about trusting Him with their future. In this scenario, the believer forgets about how dependable God has been in the past, much like James describes: “...he is like a man looking at his own face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.” (James 1:23b-24, HCSB). There are a few options to help the struggling believer in this situation. The first is to have them meditate on the times God has helped them in the past – perhaps they had journals or other ways to relive those moments. Second, it would benefit them to focus on trusting God to take control of those situations as He has done in the past. Unfortunately, God must occasionally put believers through trials to remind them of His love.

Evangelism for Introverts

The final discipline – Share God – is critical for growing God’s kingdom but requires a concerted effort from the believer to execute it. Every evangelical Christian knows what the Great Commission tells them: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19, HCSB). Countless souls have been won from the Enemy by the works of dedicated evangelists,

missionaries, and speakers – all of whom were normal people. God does not call only the eloquent speaker to do the work; He calls everyone to do it. This may seem like a great idea to believers who are naturally extroverted, but it is a nightmare for those who are introverted. In response to the survey, one of the lowest scores in "Share God" is around the statement: "I am a social person who likes to talk to others." So, sharing God will require work from both introverts and extroverts.

When one pauses to reflect on their life as a Christian, they must realize that they would have never become a Christian had they never been told about Christ. It follows, then, that without someone stepping out of their comfort zone to share their faith, others may not find faith. William J. Toms explains this well when he says: "Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some person ever reads."¹³ Whether one considers themselves an extrovert or introvert, their life can still be used to Share God. More often than not, it is not a single person who is fully responsible for bringing another to Christ. It is usually a series of people and events culminating in a person surrendering their life to Christ when God feels it is time (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:7).

If someone considers themselves an extrovert, sharing their faith should prove an easy task, but it still requires practice¹⁴. Even with someone who enjoys being with people, speaking to people, etc., it may be difficult to broach the topic of faith. The common knowledge (which is generally neither knowledge nor common) is that topics such as politics and religion are not topics to bring up in casual conversation. Various social norms will prevent even the most

¹³ "William J. Toms Quotes," Quotable Quotes, Goodreads, last updated September 15, 2023, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/439742-be-careful-how-you-live-you-may-be-the-only>

¹⁴ William Fay and Linda Evans Shepherd, *Share Jesus Without Fear* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1999), 15.

fearless extrovert from speaking about their faith, but doing so is to commit the “sin of silence.” (cf. Luke 22:54-62).

Sharing God is a critical discipline for all people, but where does that leave the introvert? After all, even expecting introverts to go out of their way to speak to people they do not know is asking quite a bit from them – asking them to speak about their faith. Forget about it. To tell an introverted person to step out of their comfort zone and speak about their faith directly to strangers will not avail much. But there are still ways that introverts can share their faith without demanding “boots on the ground” evangelism. The simplest way to share God is to live a lifestyle that glorifies God: “Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:1-2, HCSB). Believers can choose to live their life in a way that lets others they encounter understand that God has changed their lives. Regardless of one’s social disposition, building relationships with others (believers and non-believers) is a critical first step to facilitating the sharing of God.

Conclusion

Spiritual discipline is a lifelong undertaking. It is impossible to complete the work of the Holy Spirit while the believer remains on this earth because a human’s fallen nature will not allow them to attain true holiness. However, by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, mankind does not have to spend their lives attempting to complete some archaic checklist to be right with God (cf. Matthew 5:17). Yet, as God transforms the heart of the believer, there is a natural desire that should well up inside them to strive for holiness in as many ways as they can to give thanks

to Jesus. Learning to temper those desires for holiness is what leads to the work of spiritual discipline.

This document's author feels that the spiritual discipline field can be formed using four key ideals: Love God, Seek God, Trust God, and Share God. Using these items as key signifiers, the author created a series of statements to build an analysis of the believer's current spiritual state. These statements were then organized into a Likert scale assessment and presented to six believers. Based on the responses from the believers, suggestions were made to guide their growth towards spiritual maturity. No matter what situations believers are put in, God can use these as a lesson for growth. The items offered in this document are merely human inventions and, therefore, will require the action of the Holy Spirit to succeed.

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