

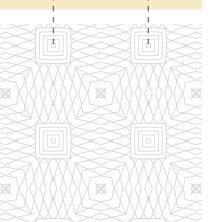
As a part of my formal education, I was required to write a dissertation—a very long and detailed book based on my research. This document consisted of five chapters and almost three hundred pages, a work of which I feel proud. I am not so proud, however, of how long it took me to write it-five years. There are many reasons I can cite to account for why it took that long-I was working full-time, married with three young children, etc. But a major reason was that until the final year-and-a-half, I did not have a good writing discipline. My goal was clear—to finish writing the dissertation and successfully defend it—and I possessed a strong desire to achieve that goal, but for too long I lacked the means for reaching that goal. It finally came down to saying "no" to some daily and weekly schedule commitments so that I could say "yes" to writing during regularly scheduled blocks of time at a designated writing location. In other words, it took discipline.

#### Reflect on this . . .

What do you desire most in life?

What are your major goals?

What frustrates your desires and keeps you from achieving your goals?



Discipline is necessary to realize our desires and goals. It is a means to an end, a method for moving forward, a path toward a destination, a way of living that enables accomplishment. If you have a goal of any kind, you will need discipline to realize that goal.

Of our many desires and goals, this study focuses on the Christian's yearning for deeper life in God and more faithful living out of faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul describes the yearning this way:

"I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . . . I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him . . . Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:8, 10, 13-14).

Like Paul, your desire and goal as a Christian can be stated in terms of relationship with God: knowing Jesus, sharing in His life and death, responding to God's call.

This deeper relationship with God is expressed in two interrelated ways, as Jesus pointed out and modeled: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength . . . [and] love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). Loving God with one's whole self and loving one's neighbor as oneself—this is the end toward which all of the Christian life moves. John Wesley, the great eighteenth century preacher, church leader, and practical theologian summarized it beautifully as: "the humble, patient, gentle love of God and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words and actions."



# Reflect on this . . .



What have you been taught is the purpose and goal of the Christian life?

In what ways does your Christian living demonstrate relationship with God? Love?



Why are disciplines necessary for a Christian to love God with one's whole self and one's neighbor as oneself? Consider these reasons:

1. GOD WANTS OUR COOPERATION WITH THE WORK BEGUN ON OUR BEHALF. Loving God and neighbor requires the work of God's grace. Only God's great love active in us can enable the response of love in return to God and to other human beings. The Holy Spirit, by communicating God's love to us and by continually inviting us to respond in love to God and to others, increases our capacity to love God with our whole self and our neighbor as ourselves. Increased capacity to love in this way is not something we can accomplish on our own but neither does it occur naturally or automatically when we open our heart to the work of the Holy Spirit. Increased capacity comes through ongoing, lifelong relationship with God wherein we cooperate with the long, slow work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of our ordinary, daily lives.

John Wesley referred to the practices where we encounter God and cooperate with the Holy Spirit for the sake of increased capacity to love as "means of grace." In our time they are most often called "spiritual disciplines." Both terms communicate something important—the ultimate significance and goal of the practices are found in God's grace, but they require discipline on our part.

## 2. BEING FULLY FORMED INTO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST TAKES

TIME AND PATIENCE. When we receive Jesus into our lives we do not automatically become like Jesus. Although we were created (formed) in God's likeness to love God and all creation, we have been de-formed by the effects of sin. That de-forming work needs to be reversed and, although our lives may be radically and miraculously turned around to a new direction of following Christ, we follow as de-formed humans.



Our openness and surrender to God in conversion and sanctification experiences put us in position to be made more like Christ, but the actual work of conforming to that image—a work known as spiritual formation—follows those experiences in the form of disciplined living.

God wants a lifelong relationship with us. The disciplines keep us connected to God in this relationship, forming and shaping us into Christlikeness over the long haul.

3. SPIRITUAL GROWTH TAKES PLACE IN BODIES. Loving God and loving our neighbor take shape in the concrete practices of ordinary, human life and in and through our very human flesh-and-blood bodies. We see this most vividly in Jesus. Accordingly, each chapter in this book begins with a Gospel verse illustrating Jesus' embodied spirituality. Contrary to the teaching of some spiritual traditions, Christianity affirms that there is no separation between the spiritual and the physical. Disciplines are necessary in the Christian life because bodies require discipline to serve purposes higher than mere self-fulfillment. Ask an athlete.<sup>2</sup>

#### Reflect on this . . .

Of the three reasons given above for the necessity of Christian disciplines, which do you find most compelling? Explain.

Which reason most challenges your current lifestyle? How?

What other reasons would you add to the list based on your experience with disciplines?

The apostle Paul recognized the value of bodily discipline when he wrote to the Christians at Corinth, pointing out that:

"Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:25-27).

We, together, are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). Self-discipline often benefits the well-being of a community, contributing to the common good. Ask a soldier.<sup>3</sup> Spiritual disciplines enable Christians to live their faith in their bodies for the sake of the well-being of others' bodies, including the body of Christ, the Church.

We often use the language of discipleship to describe what it means to be a Christian. If our desire and goal is to be disciples, then discipline is a means to that end. It is not an accident that the two words are related—it takes discipline to be a disciple. Jesus told His disciples: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). The purpose of this study is to map out and offer you initial guidance for how to, in daily life, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

### it takes discipline to be a disciple...

Each of the following chapters focuses on a specific discipline that functions as an important means of grace in the Christian life. Each discipline contributes to the transformation of heart and life, enabling increased capacity to love God and neighbor as Jesus has taught us. Each discipline uniquely shapes (forms) us to love and enables (empowers) us to love.

Chapter	Discipline	Shapes	Enables
Two	Reading	Story	Perspective
Three	Praying	Speech	Honesty
Four	Connecting	Vision	Humility
Five	Fasting	Appetite	Self-control
Six	Giving	Attitude	Generosity
Seven	Receiving	Posture	Trust

NOTES:





