

# RENOVATION THROUGH DISCIPLINE: THREE PRACTICES TO HELP TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

By Christopher L. Reese





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The essence of Christianity is becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. While on earth, Jesus called those who would be his disciples to follow him, learn from him, obey his instructions, and follow his example (e.g., Matt. 4:19; 11:28-30; Luke 6:46-49).

The late Christian thinker Dallas Willard often referred to Christians as Jesus' apprentices. He offered this helpful definition of a disciple: "[A] disciple, or apprentice, is simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is." He went on to add, "I am learning from Jesus how to lead my life, my whole life, my real life."<sup>1</sup>

One of the ways we follow Jesus' example is by practicing the same spiritual disciplines he practiced. To cite Willard again: "We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father."<sup>2</sup>

Although Jesus practiced a number of spiritual disciplines, here we'll focus on his devotion to Scripture, prayer, and service, and how we can emulate his example.

## 1. Scripture

Jesus immersed himself in the Scriptures of his day, the Old Testament. As one author summarizes, "Jesus exemplified the love of God's Word in every area of his life. He used Scripture to answer those who tested him, resist temptation, find guidance, encourage his heart, comfort others, explain his actions and ultimately face his own death."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the apostles counsel us to "crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2) and to "present yourself to God as one approved . . . who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). The more we immerse ourselves in Scripture, the more it will shape us, the way it shaped Jesus.

A common misconception about the Bible, even among Christians, is that understanding it is easy. It's true that the message of salvation comes through clearly, but to go beyond an elementary understanding takes sustained study, contemplation, and some helpful tools.

Theologian Donald Whitney offers the following three practical suggestions for successful Bible study.<sup>4</sup> First, set aside a time, ideally every day, to read Scripture. With everything that competes for our time, this can be challenging, but it's absolutely necessary for the nourishment of our souls. Whitney notes that in "no more than fifteen minutes a day you can read through the Bible in less than a year's time."<sup>5</sup>

Second, he recommends following a Bible reading plan, many of which can be found online. These help you read through the entire Bible, usually over a period of one or more years. Otherwise, it can be tempting to only read familiar passages and avoid unfamiliar territory. In our reading, we want to engage with "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27).

Third, Whitney suggests that we find "at least one word, phrase, or verse to meditate on each time you read." This helps us remember what we've read, and to think about how to apply it to our lives. Through meditation our "insight into Scripture will deepen, and you'll better understand how it applies to your life. And the more you apply the truth of Scripture, the more you'll become like Jesus."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there are a few Bible study tools that are indispensable for understanding Scripture. For the sake of brevity, I won't go into detail about them here, but I encourage you to read [my article](#) "5 Tools That Will Transform Your Bible Study." These tools provide historical, literary, and theological insights that are vital for understanding God's Word.

## 2. Prayer

Jesus spent a great deal of time in prayer. Sometimes he prayed early in the morning (Mark 1:35), and sometimes at night (Luke 6:12). He prayed before making major decisions, like choosing the twelve disciples (Luke 6:12-13); after victories, like feeding more than 5,000 people (Matt. 14:13-23); to praise God (Matt. 11:25); and when facing trials (Luke 22:44), to note a few examples.<sup>7</sup>

We should certainly emulate Jesus' example when it comes to prayer. Yet as we read the New Testament, the emphasis is not so much on setting aside long periods of time to pray as on always maintaining an attitude of prayer, and being ready to pray. Paul tells us to “devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Col. 4:2) and to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17). Peter encourages us to “be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray” (1 Peter 4:7). The author of Hebrews tells us that we can come to “God’s throne of grace with confidence . . . in our time of need” (Heb. 4:16)—and as the old hymn suggests, we need him every hour.

One of the results of being deliberate about prayer, as Willard observes, is a stronger faith. He writes, “The more we pray, the more we think to pray, and as we see the results of prayer—the responses of our Father to our requests—our confidence in God’s power spills over into other areas of our life.”<sup>8</sup>

Author Jay Dennis suggests the following helpful principles for making prayer a regular part of our lives:<sup>9</sup>

- **Choose to pray** — Prayer “is a habit, a choice, something you do regardless of how you feel. Prayer is a discipline of doing, not a matter of feeling.”
- **Confess sin immediately** — “Once you are aware you have sinned, stop what you are doing and immediately confess it. Get it right with God. Unconfessed sin will affect every area of your life and hinder God’s great plan for you.”
- **Keep it simple** — “Concentrate on being real before God, not worrying about the words you say. Prayer is a conversation with God. . . . Just talk to God in your own way.”
- **Never give up** — “Keep on praying. God has promised to bless our persistency. Since prayer must be grounded in faith, it becomes a testing time for the seriousness of our faith.”
- **Expect answers** — “Faith is expectation. Expect that God will answer your prayer. He will answer your prayers in one of four ways—‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ ‘Wait,’ or ‘I’ve got something else, something better.’”

## 3. Service

In Jesus’ day, like ours, service was looked down on while power and authority were prized. Turning this attitude on its head, Jesus told his disciples,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matt. 20:25-28)

Jesus vividly illustrated this approach to service when he washed the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper (John 13:14-15). Given the griminess and humbleness of the job, this was a task normally done by the lowest household servant. As one scholar explains,

In many respects this was a shocking experience for the disciples. It threatened them, especially in view of their [earlier] prideful argument [about who would be the greatest among them]. It violated their cultural tradition. It hit at the very heart of their self-centeredness, their desire to dominate and control one another.<sup>10</sup>

Given our human tendency towards self-centeredness, service may feel more like a discipline than studying Scripture or praying. Willard remarks that while we should serve one another spontaneously, service is also a spiritual discipline. In serving another we are training ourselves away “from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment, or covetousness. In that case, my service is undertaken as a discipline for the spiritual life.”<sup>11</sup>

One practical way to serve, to offer just one example, is to use your spiritual gift for the good of others. This, in fact, is the purpose of the spiritual gifts God gives us. As Peter instructed, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10). If you’re not sure what your spiritual gift is, there are a number of surveys and lists available online to help determine it/them ([here](#), for example).

May we become more like Jesus as we follow his example in practicing the spiritual disciplines of Scriptural study, prayer, and service.

# Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life In God* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 309, 310, Kindle. Italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), loc. 92, Kindle.

<sup>3</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 329, Kindle.

<sup>4</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 29-30. I've added some of my own commentary to Whitney's three suggestions of time, a reading plan, and meditation.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Jay Dennis, *The Jesus Habits: Exercising the Spiritual Disciplines of Jesus* (Nashville: B&H Books), 18-21.

<sup>8</sup> Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 185.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis, *The Jesus Habits*, 23-24. These are a selection from his longer list of points.

<sup>10</sup> Gene A. Getz, *Loving One Another* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2002), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 182.

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