SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
Week One: Introduction to the Spiritual Disciplines

I. Course Overview

The Lord has ordained several spiritual disciplines that function as means of grace to aid us in the two journeys of spiritual maturity and gospel advance. Examples include Scripture meditation and memorization, private and public prayer, fasting, silence and solitude, serving others, personal evangelism, and regular participation in corporate worship. Regardless of how many years you have walked with Jesus, this class will encourage and challenge you to pursue the Lord in a manner that is Word-driven, gospel-centered, and mission-minded as he conforms your character to the image of Jesus Christ.

In this class, we will learn about:

- A biblical theology of spiritual maturity
- The biblical teaching on key spiritual disciplines
- Examples of how believers from church history have practiced the spiritual disciplines
- Practical suggestions for how to practice the spiritual disciplines in your own life

II. Tentative Schedule

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III. Definitions and Directions

Holiness: “The habit of being of one mind with God, according as we find his mind described in Scripture.” (J. C. Ryle)
Sanctification: “A progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives.” (Wayne Grudem)

Spirituality: “A Christian’s experiential relationship with the Triune God, through faith in Jesus Christ, which is manifested through the full range of the believer’s convictions, attitudes, priorities, and actions.” (Nathan Finn)

Spiritual Formation: “The biblically guided process in which people are being transformed into the likeness of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit within the faith community in order to love and serve God and others.” (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities)

Spiritual Disciplines: “Those practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth among believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ.” (Don Whitney)

As with all of our teaching at FBC Durham, we will discuss the spiritual disciplines within the framework of the “two journeys” that summarize the nature of the Christian life. Andy Davis provides a brief explanation of the two journeys in his book An Infinite Journey: Growing Toward Christlikeness:

God has set before the Church of Jesus Christ two infinite journeys. These two journeys have one destination, one ultimate goal, and in the end will prove to have been one and the same journey after all. Before the foundation of the world, God ordained these two journeys for his glory and for the joy of his people. He ordained that the Church would make them, and that the Church would finish them. Both journeys require immense human effort and untold suffering in order to be accomplished. If you are a Christian today, these journeys are your central work, your central means of bringing glory to God. And what are these journeys? 1) The external journey of the worldwide advance of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ to all nations. 2) The internal journey of an individual Christian from being dead in sin to gloriously perfect in Christ.

IV. Aspects of the Spiritual Disciplines

Because the phrase “spiritual disciplines” does not appear in the Bible, many Christians are confused when they hear this language. Even among Christians who use this language, there is often confusion as to the nature, practice, and purpose of the spiritual disciplines. Should any activity you personally find to be a blessing be considered a spiritual discipline? In his book Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life, Don Whitney lists six aspects of spiritual disciplines:

1) The Bible prescribes both personal and interpersonal spiritual disciplines
2) Spiritual disciplines are actions, not attitudes
3) Genuine spiritual disciplines are biblical practices prescribed in the Scripture
4) The biblical spiritual disciplines are sufficient for knowing and experiencing God and growing in Christlikeness
5) Spiritual disciplines are derived from the gospel, not divorced from the gospel
6) Spiritual disciplines are means, not ends
V. Spiritual Disciplines as “Means of Grace”

Many people, both believers and non-believers, practice the spiritual disciplines in a legalistic way. They are either trying to earn God’s favor or keep God’s favor. This is unfortunate, but understandable: the language of spiritual disciplines sounds similar to the religious self-help lingo so common in American culture. For this reason, Kyle Strobel suggests “spiritual disciplines” is a well-meaning term put in an unfortunate way!

In reaction to this legalism, other believers do not practice spiritual disciplines in any sort of deliberate manner. Because they live under grace, they consider almost any discussion of the spiritual disciplines to be legalistic. (Though most of them still say we should read the Bible and pray regularly!) As Dallas Willard reminds us, “grace is not opposed to effort, but to earning.” Spiritual maturity is hard work!

We need to remember that we never pursue the spiritual disciplines as an end unto themselves. Instead, we pursue a closer relationship with God through the practice of the spiritual disciplines in the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the ways we live out the gospel is to practice the spiritual disciplines. When we think about spiritual disciplines in this way, we see that they are what past generations of Christians called “means of grace” that the Holy Spirit uses to conform us more and more to the image of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Don Whitney argues that the means and power for the spiritual disciplines are produced by the grace of God. He also suggests we should think of the spiritual disciplines as “ways by which we can spiritually place ourselves in the path of God’s grace and seek Him.”

VI. Key Biblical Texts

Spiritual Maturity Described

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (Col. 1:9-10).

The Church and Spiritual Maturity

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:11-16).
The Necessity of Holiness

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:14-16).

The Certainty of Holiness

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:28-29).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph. 1:3-4).

The Goal of the Spiritual Disciplines

Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe (1 Tim. 4:7b-10).

The End Result of Spiritual Maturity

Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:2-3).

The FBC Durham Elders Prayer for You

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God (Phil. 1:9-11).

VII. Recommended Resources

Books:


**Websites:**

Biblical Spirituality (Don Whitney): [www.biblicalspirituality.org](http://www.biblicalspirituality.org)

The Center for Spiritual Formation and Evangelical Spirituality (Southeastern Seminary): [http://www.sebts.edu/centers-initiatives/spiritual_formation/default.aspx](http://www.sebts.edu/centers-initiatives/spiritual_formation/default.aspx)