

Spiritual Formation

via Simplicity

The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation is an important part of the Christian life. It is the life-long process of being conformed in the image of Christ which allows us to live a life like Jesus, full of fruitful relationships, authentic rest, satisfying service, meaningful struggle, and pure contentment. Without transformation in our life, we can feel stagnant and without purpose. But as we are formed in the image of Christ, we move toward full spiritual maturity, being able to fully enjoy God and all his creation. (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Spiritual disciplines are the avenues that allow us to learn from God about our relationship with Him, ourselves, and others. They are habits, practices, and experiences that promote spiritual maturity in all who desire to be formed into the image of Christ. When we allow the practice of spiritual disciplines to open our hearts and minds to God, the Holy Spirit does the work of transformation within us. From there, we begin responding to God in ways that show our trust and dependence on Him.

Every spiritual discipline tutors us in relationship.¹

Our relationship with God also grows with the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines. Thomas Green describes how our relationship with God deepens through spiritual practices using a marriage analogy. Couples typically advance their relationship in stages. A familiar progression we see is from courtship to honeymoon and then on to marriage. Each stage of the relationship produces a depth in knowledge and intimacy.

The courtship stage is for getting to know each other. The two learn about themselves while learning more about the person they are involved with. The two begin to ask what it means to spend the rest of their life with this person. Once the couple has learned enough, they may choose to move to the honeymoon stage. During the honeymoon, the two begin to experience love for each other that is satisfied by simply being in each other's presence. Finally, the marriage stage transforms the superficial love of the honeymoon into a more profound, self-sacrificing love for one another. In this

¹ Thompson, Marjorie J. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Newly Revised Edition. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014: p. 11.

stage, the couple learns to serve and support each other. Like human relationships, our relationship with God goes through these same stages (see Figure 1).

RELATIONSHIP STAGE	CHARACTERISTICS	GOAL	SPIRITUAL PRACTICES
Courtship	Knowing God	Understanding what it means to spend my life with God.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meditative prayer • Imaginative prayer • Bible study
Honeymoon	Experiencing God	Learning to experience God's presence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retreat • Lectio Divina • Contemplative prayer
Marriage	Transformed by God	Allowing yourself to be transformed into the image of Christ.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Examen • Confession/Repentance • Simplicity

Figure 1

Spiritual disciplines help us to deepen our relationship with God by providing experiences that put us in the presence of God for increased knowledge and love of God, self, and others. As we do so, not only do we grow in intimacy with God, but we are also continually shaped into the image of Christ, enabling us to live life to the fullest.

Simplicity is just one spiritual discipline that can help you grow your relationship with Christ while being formed in his image.

Simplicity

Definition

Simplicity is living with an inward trust in God that allows you to focus on the things of God before seeking to acquire possessions, wealth, or status.

Intent

Simplicity releases us from the attitudes and demands of culture. The attitude of culture says more is better, and it demands that we respond to every call to action the world offers. Simplicity clears worldly distractions, leaving less physical and mental clutter in our inward and outward lives. The freedom of simplicity provides room to focus on our relationship with Christ and fruitful service to God's kingdom.

Simplicity has both inward and outward components. You first simplify your inner spiritual life by letting go of worldly demands which frees space to focus on the kingdom of God. Then, as inward simplicity becomes a reality, outward simplicity is expressed through your lifestyle.

Scripture References

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:25-33)

Historical Background

We find the spiritual practice of simplicity demonstrated throughout history. Just after the death and resurrection of Jesus, early Christians displayed exceptional freedom in caring for one another. In Acts 4:34-35 we see “that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.” Their actions were born from their inward focus on Christ and the call to service. Their desire to gain or retain possessions didn’t hinder their ability to let go of material goods to help others.

In the late 3rd century, Christians again demonstrated the practice of simplicity by escaping to desert monasteries. Put off by the influence of materialism at the time, believers refused to live a life dominated by greed. Instead, they withdrew from a world that asked, “How can I get more?” to meditate on the question, “How can I do without?” The simplicity of monastic life spurred transformation as they learned to detach from the need to possess material things.

The Practice

Outward simplicity is only expressed when inward simplicity is realized. As such, the practice of simplicity will be divided into practices that look inward first, then outward.

Inward Simplicity

You gain inward simplicity as you rid yourself of anxiety over obtaining worldly possessions. Richard Foster identifies three inward attitudes that symbolize inward simplicity:

- Receiving all you have as a gift from God.
- Knowing that it is God’s business, not yours, to protect what you have.
- Making your goods available to others.

After reading Matthew 6:25-33, consider the three inward attitudes of simplicity. Use the following journal prompts to reflect on your attitude toward simplicity:

- What level of trust do you have that God will provide all your physical needs? What anxiety arises when you consider trusting God to provide for you?
- Name something you own that you might have a hard time sharing with others. What makes you anxious about letting go of this item?
- Do you have a hard time saying “no” to taking on new responsibilities? What makes you anxious about saying no?

- Do you find it hard to be content with the possessions you have today (e.g., clothes, books, jewelry, etc.)? What drives you to obtain additional possessions?
- Name your biggest distraction in life. What about this item draws your attention from more important things? How hard would it be to limit this distraction? If the effort is great, why?

Outward Simplicity

Outward simplicity is an expression of inward simplicity. As you gain inward simplicity, you may notice an increased effortlessness in practicing the following:

- **Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.** Utility and durability are important. Prestige is not. What purchases can you put off because their usefulness is questionable?
- **Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.** An addiction is a compulsion you can't control. What in your life might be classified as an addiction? Refuse to be a slave to anything but God.
- **Develop a habit of giving things away.** De-accumulate. Consider giving away something that you're especially attached to.
- **Refuse to be enticed by advertising for the latest gadget.** Advertisers tell us that we need the latest and greatest. What we already have usually works just fine. Are there any upgrades to products or services that you can delay until absolutely necessary?
- **Learn to enjoy things without owning them.** Go to the park or the library. Enjoy the beach without feeling like you need beach property.
- **Develop a deeper appreciation for creation.** Go for a walk. Listen to the birds. Smell the flowers.
- **Be skeptical of buy now pay later plans.** Use extreme caution before going into debt.
- **Obey Jesus' instructions about plain and honest speech.** Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Avoid flattery and speculative language.
- **Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others.** This could mean not buying something made by slaves. It could also mean doing something menial that you expect someone else to do.

- ***Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God.*** It's easy to become distracted, even by good things. Don't let it happen. Identify things that serve as distractions and remove them in times where focus is needed.

Keep in mind that these are principles, not rules. You are free to incorporate them as the opportunity to do so presents itself. Review the list carefully and ask the Holy Spirit if there are specific areas that need more attention than others. As the Spirit leads, spend six weeks incorporating these principals into your life. As you do so, journal your simplicity journey. Consider capturing insights, wisdom, joy, or struggles during the process. Prayerfully seek the Lord during these next six weeks for guidance as you seek the freedom of simplicity. At the end of six weeks, revisit the journal prompts for inward simplicity. As you answer the questions a second time, notice how your responses change or remain the same.