

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: THE MEANS OF CHANGE

Mission to the World, Albert Shim

We have proposed that our union to Christ is the *foundation* for change, and more specifically, change that is deep, abiding, and directed toward ever increasing conformity to the character of Christ. We have seen that the bond of that union is the indwelling Holy Spirit who is the *agent* of this change that we are otherwise powerless to enact by ourselves. We now turn to consider the primary *means* through which the Holy Spirit works to produce this change, namely the spiritual disciplines.¹

The Necessity of Disciplined Action

Why is it that knowledge alone does not produce changed lives? Why do we not study our way to holiness? It is a sobering thought, but the one who has mastered the doctrines of grace and even the dynamics of gospel transformation, may still be a stranger to the work of grace in the heart that produces Christ-like character. This is why disciples are not mass-produced in a classroom or on Sunday mornings, even when sitting under the most gifted of teachers. We need more, although never less, than cognitive change if our target is the heart.

So then, how do the truths of the gospel result in changed and changing lives? We know *who* is able to do it, but *how* does the gospel get in and get deep to produce real heart change? “How are the virtues formed so that they come to constitute one’s character? The answer in Christian tradition has been quite consistent: virtues are formed by acts . . . all actions are habit forming or habit reinforcing . . . it takes intentional, repeated actions of *growing* intensity for virtues to grow.”² In other words, the deep character change that we seek occurs when the gospel is regularly and habitually *applied* and lived-out in and through actions that become habits. It is as one teacher describes it, the practice of putting in the rivet between truth and life;³ to regularly fasten as it were the gospel of grace to real life decisions and actions.

The First Tension

If character is formed through intentional, repeated actions, then what of the Holy Spirit? It sure sounds like if we apply ourselves diligently enough and commit ourselves to a formula of prescribed actions, then we can by the sheer force of the will produce depth of character and inner heart change. Can we change ourselves simply by trying harder? Are the spiritual disciplines just a recipe for self-sanctification?

Our answer of course is emphatically no! And it is precisely because of this tension that we labored first to establish in the previous lesson that the indwelling Holy Spirit is indeed the *agent* of change. Only he can change hearts; it is still in every respect “an inside job.” But the deep, inner change that occurs as one is “. . . predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29), does not just *appear*. There is no fast track; there are no spiritual prodigies. Rather, the *lifelong process* of change that is initiated, superintended, and indeed enacted by the Holy Spirit, is one that “draws within its scope the conscious life of the believer” such that “our whole being is intensely active in that process which has as its goal . . . [conformity] to the image of his Son.”⁴

This is the God-ordained means of change. God, by his Spirit, does the work to change us, but the means by which that change occurs is through the work that we have been enabled and empowered to do by the same Spirit. This is most clearly and concisely summarized by the apostle Paul in Phil. 2:12–13: “. . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Or as Luther comments, “It is true to say concerning ourselves that, inasmuch as God works in us, we work—though ‘work’ here means actually that the one doing the acting is himself acted upon, moved and led.”⁵ We are “acted upon, moved and led” to disciplined action through which the Spirit produces the inner heart change that we seek. The disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, service, and others, are some of the *actions*—the work—through which the Holy Spirit changes us. Richard Foster captures the dynamic this way:

A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground, he plants the seed, he waters the plants, and then the natural forces of the earth take over and up comes the grain. This is the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines—they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The Disciplines are God’s way of getting us into the ground; they put us where he can work within us and transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God’s means of grace. The inner righteousness we seek is not something that is poured on our heads. God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us.⁶

The Hard Road of the Disciplined Life

Consider the discipline applied by an elite athlete to her sport or a virtuoso to his instrument—the hours upon hours of practice in obscurity and the great measures of self-denial and focused intensity endured without immediate reward. Or perhaps we know by experience the degree of sustained, vigorous effort required to pursue a career or even a healthy body. Likewise, and as the terminology suggests, our apprenticeship as Christ’s disciples requires *discipline*. It must be said that the path to growth in Christ-like character—this path that *all* Christians are called to tread—is littered with thorns and thistles. It is a hard road and diversions abound. But, “holiness is not a condition into which we drift.”⁷ Paul’s language in 1 Cor. 9:24–27 (NIV) is telling:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 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.

Paul understands the gospel. He knows that victory has been secured in Christ; that he cannot earn God’s favor; that grace is full and free; yet, he doesn’t coast or relent. Rather, he engages with even greater intensity: “I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave.” The gospel of grace demands disciplined action. Absent discipline, our only recourse is to get by on our natural gifts. But assuredly we’ll soon find that in small, almost imperceptible steps, our prayers get neglected, our attention to the Word gets broken, and our participation in corporate worship becomes less a celebration and more a critique. Such is the tendency toward secret departure from God.⁸

The Second Tension

Does this emphasis on disciplined action diminish or even nullify the priority of grace? Again, our answer is no. I wonder if we are so fearful of obscuring grace in our desire to be “gospel-centered,” that we simply do not speak enough about the hard road of the disciplined life. But, “grace is opposed to earning, not to effort.”⁹ We do not and cannot by our own effort, even effort described with such terms as “focused intensity,” “maximal engagement,” and “vigorous exertion,” thereby make ourselves more acceptable to God. We do not earn God’s favor through the disciplines; God’s favor is already over us! It is finished! By the work of another do we stand; to the work of another do we cling; because of the work of another do we work with everything we’ve got.

Grace precedes, motivates, enables, and empowers the effort. There is work to do, not to earn but because we have already received. And without this grace the spiritual disciplines are death. They become laws to abide, rules to follow, and burdens to bear, breeding externalism, formalism, legalism, Pharisaism, and every other death-nurturing “-ism” you might name. We will then exult in our willpower and condemn ourselves (*and*

others!) when we fall short. That's without grace. But by grace we are led to work and by grace is the effort made to bear fruit.

The Spiritual Disciplines and Friendship with God

We come now to the heart of the spiritual disciplines. They are not simply the means through which the Holy Spirit changes us as if a better "us" was an independent object of our pursuit. The disciplines are at the most fundamental level, the means by which we cultivate a friendship with God, our Creator, our Savior, and our Lord. We are on this hard road *with him*. And just as in any relationship, depth, intimacy, and trust in friendship are not enjoyed except by ever-increasing, intentional, active pursuit. Absent this, there is left only "a shallow association of civility."¹⁰

Will we be satisfied with "a shallow association of civility" with the God who pursued us to death on a cross, to call us child and friend? It is not enough to affirm that the spiritual disciplines are the means to personal transformation; they are the means by which a deep, love relationship with our Savior is nurtured, honored, and protected. And with time, the initial hiddenness that might have characterized the relationship will give way, until it becomes more and more intolerable to *not* be in fellowship with him. This is why conceiving of the disciplines as laws or drudgery is so profane; they are not legalistic obligations or duties even as they are spoken of with the language of *must*. Rather, they are the means by which we find ourselves in conversation with God more habitually. They are the means by which we grow quicker to discern his voice; by which we develop a growing displeasure with the things that displease him; by which we begin to love the things that he loves; and they are the means by which the Holy Spirit changes us into the people God created us to be.

The spiritual disciplines then could well be conceived of as *the lived experience of friendship with God*. It is a wonder, but "the majestic Creator of the universe desires our friendship. In fact, he is more interested in this endeavor than we are; he has been contemplating it and planning it for a long time. God is personal and has created us to enjoy deep friendship with him."¹¹ He has pursued us with a furious love, so let us now also seek him on the hard road of the disciplined life.

Endnotes

1. By "spiritual disciplines" we refer to those practices given to Christians in all ages for the purpose of growth in Christ-likeness. Traditionally, these have included prayer, Bible reading, fasting, solitude, and others. There is understandably some variation in what is considered a spiritual discipline. We say that the disciplines are the primary means because they are not the exclusive means. For instance, suffering is often considered another means the Spirit uses to produce inner heart change.
2. Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 96–7.
3. See David Powlison in his course "Dynamics of Biblical Change."
4. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 148–9.
5. Quoted from Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 65–66 in Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 81.
6. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 7.
7. John Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 193.
8. See Octavius Winslow, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*.
9. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*, 34
10. Klaus Issler, *Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God*, 16.
11. *Ibid*, 28.