

“Habits of Grace”
Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines
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The means of grace are not about earning God’s favor, twisting his arm, or controlling his blessing, but readying ourselves for consistent saturation in the roll of his tides. And the grace of God inspires and empowers the various habits and practices by which we avail ourselves of God’s means.

It is in this endless sea of his grace that we walk the path of the Christian life and take steps of grace-empowered effort and initiative. I can flip a switch, but I don’t provide the electricity. I can turn on a faucet, but I don’t make the water flow. We can’t make the favor of God flow, but he has given us circuits to connect and pipes to open expectantly. He also has his regular channels. And we can routinely avail ourselves of these revealed paths of blessing—or neglect them to our detriment.

“The essence of the Christian life,” writes John Piper, “Is learning to fight for joy in a way that does not replace grace.”

We cannot earn God’s grace or make it flow apart from his free gift. But we can position ourselves to go on getting as he keeps on giving.

Three main principles:

1. **Hearing God’s voice**
2. **Having his ear**
3. **Belonging to his body.**

Or simply: **Word, Prayer, and Fellowship.**

“Train yourself for godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7). Discipline yourself for growth. Take regular action to get more of God in your mind and your heart, and echo his ways in your life—which will make you increasingly like him (“godliness”). It’s a gift, and we receive it as we become it.

The way to receive the gift of God’s empowering our actions is to do the actions. If he gives the gift of effort, we receive that gift by expending the effort.

“Think of the Spiritual Disciplines,” says Donald S. Whitney, “as ways we can place ourselves in the path of God’s grace

Knowing and enjoying Jesus is the final end of hearing his voice, having his ear, and belonging to his body.

1. Hearing God’s voice

Without the Bible, we will soon lose the genuine gospel and the real Jesus and the true God. It is a summons to the principle of soaking our lives in the voice of God and diversifying the portfolio of access points.

Fashion rhythms of life that help you revolve around having God’s incarnate Word, by God’s gospel word, through God’s written word. The fundamental means of God’s ongoing grace, through his Spirit, in the life of the Christian and the life of the church is God’s self-expression in his Word, in the gospel, perfectly kept for us and on display in all its textures, riches, and hues in the external written word of the Scriptures.

May God give you intentionality to shape your weeks with his word, ingenuity to shower your days with his voice, and creativity to punctuate your life and the lives of those around you with fresh routines for regularly availing yourself of his life-giving Words. Consciously seeking to have that truth shape and permeate our reality. At the end of the day, there is simply no replacement for finding a regular time and place, blocking out distractions, putting your nose in the text, and letting your mind and heart be led and captured and thrilled by God himself communicating to us in his objective written words. Find a spot to settle down for a few moments to meditate, which is the high point and richest moment of Bible intake

Whether you feel like a beginner or the grizzled old veteran, one of the most important things you can do is regularly read the Bible for yourself. But the habit of daily Bible reading can be a marvelous means of God's grace. It takes about seventy hours to read the Bible from cover to cover. "That's less time than the average American spends in front of the television every month," observes Donald S. Whitney.

In no more than fifteen minutes a day you can read through the Bible in less than a year's time." Most of the world's best Bible readers and appliers have little formal training, if any. There is simply no stand-in for studying the Scriptures for ourselves, and doing so for the long haul.

In the introduction to his book *Future Grace*, John Piper celebrates the place of "unrushed reflection," and asks the reader to make space for it.

He means for us to not just hear him, not only to read quickly over what he says, but to reflect on what he says and knead it into our hearts. This art is meditation, which Donald S. Whitney defines as "deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture for the purposes of understanding, application, and prayer."

Meditation Made Christian

It doesn't entail emptying our minds, but rather filling them with biblical and theological substance—truth outside of ourselves—and then chewing on that content, until we begin to feel some of its magnitude in our hearts. It is feeding our minds on the words of God and digesting them slowly, savoring the texture, enjoying the juices, cherishing the flavor of such rich fare. Whitney catalogs several prominent Puritans to the effect that meditation is "the missing link between Bible intake and prayer," Meditation must follow hearing and precede prayer. . . .

What we take in by the word we digest by meditation and let out by prayer." (Thomas Manton, *Complete Works*, vol. 17)

"The reason we come away so cold from reading the word is, because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation." (Thomas Watson, "How We May Read the Scriptures with Most Spiritual Profit," dir. 8)

"The great reason why our prayers are ineffectual, is because we do not meditate before them." (William Bates, "On Divine Meditation," chap. 4)

Meditation bridges the gap between hearing from God and speaking to him. We "warm ourselves at the fire of meditation." As Matthew Henry says, "As meditation is the best preparation for prayer, so prayer is the best issue of meditation."

Christian meditation begins with our eyes in the Book, or ears open to the Word, or a mind stocked with memorized Scripture. I remind myself over and over that it's not about checking boxes but communing with God in his word through meditation and into prayer.

Bring the Bible Home to Your Heart. We should be clear that aiming to apply God's words to our lives is grounded in the good instinct that the Bible is for us. Thomas Watson's counsel when we open the Book,

Take every word as spoken to yourselves. When the word thunders against sin, think thus: “God means my sins;” when it presseth any duty, “God intends me in this.” Many put off Scripture from themselves, as if it only concerned those who lived in the time when it was written; but if you intend to profit by the word, bring it home to yourselves: a medicine will do no good, unless it be applied.

The kind of application most important to pursue in encountering God’s word is such astonishment. Press the Scriptures to your soul. Pray for the awakening of your affections. Bring the Bible home to your heart. Coming to the Scriptures to see and feel makes for a drastically different approach than primarily coming to do. The Bible is gloriously for us, but it is not mainly about us. We come most deeply because of whom we will see, not for what we must do. “Become a kind of person,” counsels Piper, “don’t amass a long list.”

Theology gets us to the ballpark; memorized Scripture, into the clubhouse.

There’s nothing necessarily new age or transcendental about meditation. The old-school version, commended throughout the Bible, is thinking deeply about some truth from the mouth of God, and rolling it around in our minds long enough that we feel a sense of its significance in our hearts, and then even begin to envision its application in our lives. The mingling of meditation with memorization helps us obey the command of Colossians 3:2: “Set your minds on things that are above.”

Meditation is the nonnegotiable habit of grace I want to practice each day, even if only briefly when life circumstances have crunched my time. Learning the text “by heart” is secondary; taking the text to heart is primary.

Resolve to Be a Lifelong Learner

A lifelong learner will want to take care that most of life’s spare moments are not cannibalized by mere mindless entertainment. Resist the urge to squander spare time on mindless entertainment without limit.

2. Having his ear

It shouldn’t surprise us, then, to find that prayer is not finally about getting things from God, but getting God. Prayer is first and foremost an orientation of life, rather than the particular practices and patterns which might be characteristic of a certain community or season of life, or season of church history.

Pray in Secret or maybe you have little-to-no real private prayer life (which might be as common today among professing Christians as it’s ever been),

Francis Chan’s alarm: “My biggest concern for this generation is your inability to focus, especially in prayer.”

The danger lurks of sidelining God and shifting our focus to making ourselves look impressive. Private prayer cuts through the fog and confusion and helps to show that our relationship with God is authentic. This is the heart of prayer—not getting things from God, but getting God.

How we pray, says J. I. Packer, “is as important a question as we can ever face.”

Here are five suggestions for enriching private prayer.

1. Create Your Closet

2. Begin with Bible

3. Adore, Confess, Thank, Ask
4. Divulge Your Desires—and Develop Them
5. Keep It Fresh

Here are five lessons I've learned in leading small-group prayer in recent years.

1. Make It Regular
2. Start with Scripture. We inhale the Scriptures and exhale in prayer.
3. Limit Share Time. It can be easy to let the sharing of requests cannibalize the actual praying together. Encourage people to share their requests by praying them with the information needed to let others in on what they're praying.
4. Encourage Brevity and Focus
5. Pray without Show, but with Others in Mind

Here are nine profits of praying with others.

1. For Added Power
2. For Multiplied Joy
3. For Greater Glory to God
4. For Fruitful Ministry and Mission
5. For Unity among Believers
6. For Answers We Otherwise Wouldn't Get
7. To Learn and Grow in Our Prayers
8. To Know Each Other When we pray together, not only do we reveal what most captures our hearts and truly is our treasure, but as we pray together, says Jack Miller, "You can tell if a man or woman is really on speaking terms with God."
9. To Know Jesus More. The great purpose of prayer is not getting things from God but getting God,

Sharpen Your Affections with Fasting

Journaling as a Pathway to Joy. A journal can be greatly beneficial in ripening our joy along the journey. When some important event happens to us, or around us, or some "serendipity" breaks in with divine fingerprints, a journal is a place to capture it and make it available for future reference.

Here are three ways, among others, to use journaling to enrich the present.

1. Examine
2. Meditate
3. Disentangle, Draw Out, and Dream

The discipline of writing facilitates careful thinking, catalyzes deep feeling, and inspires intentional action. Good writing is not just the expression of what we're already experiencing, but the deepening of it.

Here are five additional pieces of advice for flourishing in this endeavor.

1. Keep It Simple
2. Don't Catch Up
3. Take God Seriously
4. Bring the Gospel
5. Stay with It

Take a Break from the Chaos By all accounts, things are more crowded, and noisier, than they've ever been. "One of the costs of technological advancement," says Donald S. Whitney, "is a greater temptation to avoid quietness." And so, many of us "need to realize the addiction we have to noise." Silence and solitude are not ideal states, but rhythms of life to steady us for a fruitful return to people and noise. Call it what you may, these short daily stretches of engaging directly with God in the Scriptures and prayer are possible amid the chaos of modern life, and invaluable in guarding our heads and hearts in a noisy, crowded world.

3. Belonging to his body

Learn to Fly in the Fellowship

1. Good Listening Requires Patience
2. Good Listening Is an Act of Love
4. Good Listening Is Ministry

According to Bonhoeffer, there are many times when "listening can be a greater service than speaking."

One of Dunn's counsels for cultivating good listening is: "Put more emphasis on affirmation than on answers

5. Good Listening Prepares Us to Speak Well, As Bonhoeffer writes, "We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God."
6. Good Listening Reflects Our Relationship with God

Our inability to listen well to others may be symptomatic of a chatty spirit that is drowning out the voice of God. Bonhoeffer warns,

Kindle the Fire in Corporate Worship

Five Benefits of Corporate Worship

1. Awakening
2. Assurance
3. Advance
4. Accepting Another's Leading
5. Accentuated Joy

Listen for Grace in the Pulpit

1. To Forget Ourselves
2. To Fill Our Faith
3. To Grow in Grace
4. To Be Equipped
5. To Encounter Jesus

Wash in the waters again and grow in grace at the table

Embrace the blessing of rebuke

Seven steps toward correction that is truly Christian.

1. Check Your Own Heart First
2. Seek to Sympathize
3. Pray for Restoration
4. Be Quick
5. Be Kind
6. Be Clear and Specific

But your kindness may send the wrong message if it is not matched with clarity.

Making disciples is a great means of God's ongoing grace in the life of the one doing the discipling. Here are four ways, among many.

1. Disciplemaking Shows Us Our Smallness and God's Bigness "think big, start small, go deep."
2. Disciplemaking Challenges Us to Be Holistic Christians
3. Disciplemaking Makes Us More Aware of Our Sin
4. Disciplemaking Teaches Us to Lean Heavier on Jesus

1. Money Is a Tool

2. How We Use Money Reveals Our Hearts

3. Sacrifice Varies from Person to Person. There is some help, even if minimal, in identifying and naming the extremes of sustained opulence and austerity.

4. Generosity Is a Means of Grace

5. God Is the Most Cheerful Giver

The Clock

As Donald S. Whitney reasons, "If people threw away their money as thoughtlessly as they throw away their time, we would think them insane. Yet time is infinitely more precious than money because money can't buy time."

1 Corinthians 6:19–20 tailored to our planning: Your time is not your own. You were bought with a price. So glorify me in your schedule.

Here are four lessons in fruitful time management, for the mission of love.

1. Consider Your Calling

2. Plan with Big Stones

3. Make the Most of Your Mornings. Study after study confirms the importance of the first hours of the day for fulfilling the most important (and often most intensive) aspects of our calling.

4. Create Flexibility for Meeting Others' Needs