

# The Spiritual Discipline of Study

“A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom. . .” “. . . Spiritual disciplines, “exercises unto godliness,” are only activities undertaken to make us capable of receiving more of his life and power without harm to ourselves or others.” --Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 156

This being true we need to ask and answer the following questions regarding study as a Christian discipline:

- Why is study important?
- What is study?
- What is the object of our study?
- How shall we study?

## I. Why is Study Important?

“The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total transformation of the person. It aims at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the Discipline of study. The apostle Paul tells us that the way we are transformed is by the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2). The mind is renewed by applying it to those things that will transform it. “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely whatever is gracious, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8). The Discipline of Study is the primary vehicle to bring us to “*think* about these things.” Therefore, we should rejoice that we are not left to our own devices but have been given this means of God’s grace for the changing of our inner spirit.”

“Many Christians remain in bondage to fears and anxieties simply because they do not avail themselves of the Discipline of study. They may be faithful in church attendance and earnest in fulfilling their religious duties and still they are not changed. I am not here speaking only of those who are going through mere religious forms, but of those who are genuinely seeking to worship and obey Jesus Christ as Lord and Master. They may sing with gusto, pray in the Spirit, live as obediently as they know, even receive divine visions and revelations; and yet the tenor of their lives remains unchanged. Why? Because they have never taken up one of the central ways God uses to change us: study. Jesus made it unmistakably clear that it is the knowledge of the truth that will set us free. “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (Jn. 8:32). Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us. Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free.”

“This principle is true in every area of human endeavor. It is true in biology and mathematics. It is true in marriages and other human relationships. But it is especially true in reference to the spiritual life. Many are hampered and confused in

the spiritual walk by simple ignorance of truth. Worse yet, many have been brought into the most cruel bondage by false teaching. “You traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matt. 23:15). – Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 55

## II. What is Study?

Study, as a spiritual discipline is the pursuit of truth as a means of spiritual transformation. The following passages from John’s writings will help us grasp the importance of this idea.

- It is the truth that sets us free: John 8:32 And ye shall know the **truth**, and the truth shall make you free.
- It is the truth that sanctifies us: John 17:17-19 Sanctify them through thy **truth**: thy word is **truth**. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the **truth**.
- The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth: John 14:17 *Even* the **Spirit of truth**; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. John 15:26 But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, *even* the **Spirit of truth**, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: John 16:13 Howbeit when he, the **Spirit of truth**, is come, he will guide you into all **truth**: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, *that* shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.
- Jesus Christ is Himself the Truth: John 1:14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and **truth**. John 1:17 For the law was given by Moses, *but* grace and **truth** came by Jesus Christ. John 14:6 Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the **truth**, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.
- True worship is according to Truth: John 4:23-24 But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in **truth**: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God *is* a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship *him* in spirit and in **truth**.
- There is a “spirit of error” as well as “The Spirit of Truth”: 1 John 5:6 This is he that came by water and blood, *even* Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.

### III. What is the object of our study?

#### A. The Scriptures

- Only the Scriptures are inspired by God, capable of making us wise unto salvation, and profitable to equip us for every good work. II Tim. 3:15 – 17
- Therefore we must give them priority and be intentional in our effort to know them and to put them into practice
- They must establish our “world view” and give us a frame of reference for interpreting all other things

#### B. All other things that assist us in better understanding the Scriptures and the Christian Faith and make us more useful to God, His Kingdom and others

- Titus 1:15 Unto the pure all things *are* pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving *is* nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.
- All truth comes from God, and truth sought in humility will lead to greater sanctification and usefulness in God’s service.
- The difference between study as study and study as a spiritual discipline is not necessarily in what we study but in our reasons for studying it.
- In a spiritually disciplined life all things are offered to God. We make no difference between sacred and secular, between work and prayer – *laborare est orare*. 1 Corinthians 10:31 Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye **do, do all** to the **glory of God**.

#### C. How shall we study?

- We will only do it effectively if we intentionally decide what and how we will study.
- The plan will vary from person to person, but the first important step is to have a plan.
- This plan will involve specific times, subjects and activities as in the following examples.

1. During the coming year I will study the Bible by:
    - a. Reading four chapters each day
    - b. Attending Sunday School regularly
    - c. Enrolling in a course on Bible Survey
    - d. Memorizing one Bible verse a week
    - e. Keeping a journal of the most important things I have learned from the Bible
  2. During the year coming year I will make a study of prayer by:
    - a. Studying the prayers of the Bible
    - b. Being a part of a regular prayer group
    - c. Reading two classic books on prayer
    - d. In order to do this I will set aside two one hour time periods each week that will be reserved for this activity, and I will seek the advice of a spiritual counselor as to what I should read and check my progress and understanding with him/her on a regular periodic basis
- One of the best ways to study in order to grow is to read the best books on a regular basis.
  - To help you get started here is a list of seven modern classics
    1. Douglas Sturaurt and Donald Fee, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*
    2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
    3. John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity*
    4. Paul Little, *Know What you Believe*
    5. T. C. Hammond, *In Understanding be Men*
    6. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*
    7. O. Hallesby, *Prayer*
  - If study, or even reading, is difficult for you, you might want to read : Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book*
  - In the present world the internet has become for many the primary source of information. It is of course a two-edged sword, containing the best and the worst of everything, but used in a disciplined fashion it is an invaluable resource for those who want to seriously study the Bible and the Christian Faith. As in all things internet the number of sites is staggering. Here are a few that I find especially useful:
    1. [www.e-sword.net](http://www.e-sword.net) --A very user-friendly and effective Bible study resource that may be downloaded to your computer free of charge. I use this one every day.

2. [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org) --This contains hundreds of articles on biblical books and subjects written by qualified teachers.
3. [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org) --A site sponsored by Calvin College that contains almost any classical Christian writing that you would ever need.
4. [www.biblos.com](http://www.biblos.com) --Another great Bible study site. This one automatically gives you a map related to any passage you bring up. It also has the Bible in almost any English version and language imaginable.
5. [www.bibleplaces.com](http://www.bibleplaces.com) --Beautiful, high-quality pictures of biblical sites.

## How We Learn the Bible

- Visualize
- Analyze
- Synthesize
- Memorize
- Internalize
- Verbalize