

1-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Dudley, Brad (1992) "The Spiritual Discipline of Study," *Leaven*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss4/10>

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The Spiritual Discipline of Study



by Brad Dudley

Inadequacy, pride: such are the bipolar extremes of the “spiritual disciplines.” Isn’t that the warning Jesus gives in his summit sermon when discussing the disciplines of fasting, prayer, and giving? Charles Swindoll echoes the warning of Jesus, “These disciplines were never meant to be displays of the flesh.”¹ When study becomes an end unto itself or a means of drawing attention unto oneself, certainly we join those to whom Jesus said, “they have already received their reward.”

Before we begin mining the rich ore of study as a spiritual discipline, allow me to narrow the field of this otherwise ambiguous term. We are not talking about product study, though a product may come from this study. Product is not the goal. We are not talking about the study of information storing or sharing, though certainly this too would be a by-product. We are not talking about academic study; and Bible reading is not the subject of the spiritual discipline of study, though Bible reading may occur.

What we *are* talking about is the study that permeates life. It is what A. W. Tozer would call “Following hard after God.” Though, for many, study may be a discipline of habit; the study we speak of is more a discipline of heart. It is the seed of desire expressed by the Psalmist, “As the deer pants for streams water, so my soul pants for you O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go meet with God?”² It is the instruction of Paul,

“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.”³ It is the imperative call, “Be still and know that I am God.”⁴

She had gray hair; to my knowledge it was her natural color. You could trace weather-worn roads in her wrinkled skin. She was no theologian, not by the standards that theologians set for their profession. Her education was more simple than complex, but she had studied more than the counsel of scholars. Her name was Anna, and she lived in the temple. Her life’s pursuit was to know the God who had revealed himself. Is it any wonder she recognized the voice of God in a cry of an eight-day-old infant? At the heart of the discipline of study it is not knowledge that is found, rather it is knowing. It is not structured by theoretical theology, but is supported by a faith strengthened by “experience theology.” As Tozer states it, “The man who has been taught by the Holy Spirit will be a seer rather than a scholar. The difference is that the scholar sees and the seer sees through; and that is a mighty difference indeed.”⁵

The Spiritual Discipline of Study: Its Environment

More than anything else, it is my limited understanding of what study is that actually keeps me from study. For instance, too often study utilizes the

mind as a filing system or a factory with its cogs turning in exhaustion and sometimes in futility. That was what initially troubled me with this assignment. There was a need Vs. futility tug-of-war in my mind. I recognized and applauded the need for study as a spiritual discipline, but I feared the futility of

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writing about study, the stand-alone discipline of study. While that thought troubled me, it also liberated me to explore the spiritual discipline of study. The liberation came from the modifier that makes it important: *spiritual*. As a “success discipline” or a “self-righteous discipline,” study has been the ruin of many self-made man and woman. As a “product discipline” or an “education discipline,” study has fueled the fire of burn-out. However, a spiritual discipline is different. It knows no deadlines, seeks no acknowledgment, receives no grade. It engages the mind but draws on the inexhaustible power of the eternal spirit. It reshapes the physical but touches both the temporal and the eternal spirit. The environment of spiritual study, therefore, is comprised of two worlds: the temporal and the eternal. Study’s ultimate production is the spirit remaking the will and transforming the mind. It is realized in a lifetime in pursuit of God.

To illustrate the environment of study, realized in a lifetime pursuit of God, an exploration of Psalms 119 is useful. The psalmist, utilizing an enormous acrostic, models the spiritual discipline of study. The writer is consumed with the ways of God, the laws of God, the word of God, seeking God, being sought by God, following God, being taught by God, longing for God, meditating on God, finding refuge in God...The Psalmist has willed his way to be God’s way. His will has acted on his mind to replace evil thoughts with the divine thoughts of God.

It is important to understand that the pursuit of God is in itself a product of God. Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”⁶ As Tozer states, “The impulse to pursue God originates with God, but the outworking of that impulse is our following hard after him; and all the time we are pursuing him we are already in his hand.”⁷ This seeking and pursuing must go beyond finding that there is a God or even realizing his grace in salvation. We must, according to Tozer, crave a knowledge of God which goes beyond an initial and rudimentary understanding. Accordingly, he states,

How tragic that we in this dark day have had our seeking done for us by our teachers. Everything is made to center upon the initial act of ‘accepting Christ’ and we are not expected thereafter to crave any further revelation of God to our souls. We have been snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we found him we need no more seek Him.⁸

Instead we must follow with the courage of Moses whose relationship with God drew him so close that he begged for more, “Show me your glory!”

The Spiritual Discipline of Study: Its Elements

Necessity has taught us the tools of academic and product study: language, research methods, organizational skills, communication forms, and deadline planning. Though all of these are invaluable, none of them are the major players in the spiritual discipline of study. The keys of the spiritual discipline are not very flashy. They are: wonder, awe, meditation, praise, relationship.... These elements, like the dust of the earth, are fertile soil of spiritual growth, the building blocks of life, vast and tireless resources. Though they are common, they produce what is uncommon.

The spiritual discipline of study recently revealed itself in an unexpected way. Had I not been writing this article, I would certainly have missed it. I sat around a large table with a dozen or so preachers. One individual had been selected to share a few thoughts with the group. He brought a handout that contained the seed thoughts to a series of five sermons. They were five representatives of his “product study.” It was his off-handed comment that caught my ear. “I had this idea one day in the shower.” Everyone laughed. A colleague leaned over and whispered to me, “I have my best ideas in the shower.” On more than one occasion that too has been my experience and perhaps yours as well. Let me assure you my

shower is not designed for study. There is no pen and paper, no computer, no books, no tapes; there is only soap and water. Rarely do I go to the shower in search of an idea. Yet what is spiritual yields a fruit that is presentable from a moment of quietness. It is in the embryonic warmth of the shower that the mind is often stirred and the eyes opened as the spirit gives birth to realization and truth.

Perhaps, it is that unplanned moment that best describes the true spiritual discipline of study. It is the heart inclined toward God saying, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."⁹ It is found in a life-style and expressed by the psalmist in a moment that represents a focus on God. "Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statues and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes from worthless things; renew my life according to your word."¹⁰

We need more shower moments, more times that focus on the God with whom we share a relationship. It is again Tozer that reminds us, "The modern scientist has lost God amid the wonders of his world; we Christians are in real danger of losing God amid the wonders of his Word. We have almost forgotten that God is a person..."¹¹ We need more time spent studying the bonds of our relationship with God, and this not from a factual basis but from the couch of self-examination and the quiet of meditation.

The spiritual discipline of study is a hill-side experience. It is David in awe of God as he watches sheep. It is spontaneous song in a pasture-land. It moves from quietness to shouts, from stillness to leaps, from blindness to sight. Writing down that expression of praise to share with other followers is simply a decision — an option — driven by a desire for a psalm or a contemporary song of praise, which are by-products of spiritual study. Such expressions are composed in the richness of the basic elements.

The spiritual discipline of study does not require that you get up earlier or go to bed later. There are no demands to seek more education or memorize more Bible. A professor will never test over the material, and you can not enroll in a course of study that leads to a degree. Illumination, not instruction, is the course that is sought. Tozer is helpful once again as he illustrates the futility of instruction without illumination:

It is altogether possible to be instructed in the rudiments of faith and still have no

real understanding of the whole thing, and it is possible to go on to become expert in Bible doctrines and not have spiritual illumination...Most of us are acquainted with churches that teach Bible to their children from the tenderest years...and still never produce in them a living Christianity nor a virile godliness. Their members show no evidence of having passed from death unto life...Their religious lives are correct and reasonably moral, but wholly mechanical and altogether lacking radiance. They wear their faith as persons in mourning once wore black arm bands to show their love and respect for the departed. Such persons cannot be dismissed as hypocrites. Many of them are pathetically serious about it all. They are simply blind.¹²

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and light for my path,"¹³ acknowledges the heart of the seeker. With the psalmist we affirm, "If your law had not been my

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delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts for by them you have renewed my life."¹⁴ Certainly we must emphasize again that we are talking about more than words, more than ink and paper. Jesus Christ is himself the communication (Word) of God. He is the way, the truth, and the life. The one that opens blinded eyes still is the light of the world.

Resource Page: Cultivating a Heart not a Habit

It is our common experience that relationships are ever in a state of flux: some are cyclical other lineal; some are loving while others are stormy; some

are growing, others declining. It is our common conviction that any relationship which flourishes will be a relationship in which we invest. It is important in this case to understand the investment required is not time. Time is a valued currency in a relationship, but there is a precursor to time. Time will come naturally with an investment of our beings (our hearts).

It is possible to have a time-invested relationship with God. I call it a "habitual relationship." It is like the family that eats dinner together every evening. This in itself is an accomplishment, an accomplishment of time and habit, but it tells us very little of the relationship. Habitual relationships soon become a burden of going through the motions. They are like the couple that has grown tired of the same five recipes and dreads mealtime. Or are they like the couple whose sexual relationship has lost its fire and has become little more than a habit of co-habitation. Tragedy is the end product of habitual relationships. They are robotic in nature as they make lifeless gestures and watch for approval from emotionless faces.

In more than one way we can have a habitual relationship with God. Too obvious is the churchgoer that punches an attendance card; less obvious is the neglected and forgotten discipline which modifies our behavior out of the reservoir of the spirit. All relationships, even a relationship with God, must be guarded against what is *only* habitual. Habit in the place of the heart will lead first to boredom, then

yawning, yawning to dozing, dozing to coma. The outer shell of the habit may remain, but the inner life of the heart will have ceased. Time is meant to enrich relationships. Over periods of minutes, days, months, and years closer bonds are drawn from shared experiences and deepened trust. Some of my earliest memories involve my mother and father teaching me to know God. Through the years, I continue to discover more of him than I had previously known. Some of the discovery has come because of my education, but most has come in the shower or on the hillside.

Healthy, growing relationships have captivated the heart. They are like two lovers who think of each other throughout the day at work. Though many other thoughts and actions fill the day, one thing is constant—their love. Though they each have habits, very little of who they are relationally is habitual. Times shared together are filled with discovery, self-disclosure and the simple joy of being together (even with no agenda). When was the last time you just enjoyed being with God when there was no agenda?

My heading promised a resource. Just as the elements of the spiritual discipline of study are different from the tools of other kinds of study, so are the resources. You will not find a bibliography here. Instead, the resource for the spiritual discipline of study is this moment you have in the presence of God and his call to your heart, "*Be still and know that I am God.*"