

The Special Habits (Spiritual Disciplines)

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This is only an “introduction” to these special habits. There is enough information, however, for you to jump into them. And, this might be the best way to do it. If you try to learn all about them, you will get stuck learning and never move on to using them, like a new tool with a large instruction manual. Sometimes it is best to learn enough to get it running, and then to learn more as you use the tool. Plus, there is no fine print or Danger Warnings.

Here are some important tips first:

- The Bible gives little instruction in how to do these habits because they were so common that everyone already knew how to do them. We, however, might need some guidance.
- The mechanics of the habits are not as important as your heart. Your attitude sets you before God; so don't get choked on the process.
- The goal is not to become ritualistic, but to grow your relationship with God.
- These spiritual disciplines aren't a sign of maturity; they are the way to maturity. There is a danger inherent in these habits. You can feel spiritually mature just by doing them. That is false. They are tools. Using the tools isn't impressive. Growing is.
- We can't grow ourselves, like a farmer can't grow his crops. He can only prepare the soil and plant the seed. God grows it. The same is true for our character. The habits sow to the Spirit; they put us in a place where God can work within us.

The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. (Galatians 6:8)

- These are not hard to practice, complicated, or ooey-gooey. The primary task is to long for God and to use the habits as tools, in any way they can help you, to get you before him.

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? (Psalm 42:1-2)

- Don't confuse “discipline” or “habit” with “painful and unpleasant.” Jesus said his yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matthew 11:29-30). Training can be fun. It can certainly be deeply joyful.
- Practicing spiritual habits can become legalistic. Don't let that happen. Refuse to give yourself credit for doing a habit. Reward yourself for the character development when you see it. Remember, doing the habits doesn't earn you anything.

- Do these habits within your personality. Remember, they are training tools. Don't associate spiritual "disciplines" with a "disciplined" or highly organized personality. God made you like you are. Relate to him out of how he made you.
- Embrace the mystery and expect the supernatural. The habits put you in a position for God to work. Wait for his moves and welcome them. The habits require you to follow the Spirit's lead. Watch for his moves and follow them.
- Choose a discipline that supports what you need. If you struggle with a sin of **doing** something wrong, choose a discipline that strengthens your **not-doing** muscles (fasting, slowing/solitude, simplicity, secrecy). If you need to improve in an area where you are **not doing** something, choose a habit that develops your **doing** abilities (worship, evangelism, study, prayer, giving, community, meditation, confession, celebration).

Dallas Willard makes a distinction between habits of abstinence and of engagement. He says we should choose a habit or discipline that counters our specific sin or tendency. "Roughly speaking, the disciplines of abstinence counteract tendencies to sins of commission, and the disciplines of engagement counteract tendencies to sins of omission.... Abstinence, then, makes way for engagement." "Abstinence" means to abstain for a period of time from the satisfaction of something that is normal and legitimate but has become distorted. "Engagement" is to proactively train by doing something we don't normally do in order to develop a characteristic we couldn't develop directly.

Disciplines of Abstinence: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice

Disciplines of Engagement: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, submission

(Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, chapter 9)

- Below is a summary of the Special Habits. On the following pages are fuller explanations. For each habit there is a biblical explanation, a brief bit about when to use it, and a little about what to do. See the books on Spiritual Disciplines for much more help.
1. Meditation—Focusing your thinking on one truth about God as revealed in his Word while learning to hear his voice.
 2. Fasting—Abstaining from food for a period of time to rediscover God as your source of sustenance.
 3. Slowing/Solitude—Removing yourself from busyness and your normal environment to heal and hear God.
 4. Simplicity—De-cluttering and downsizing your material life to free your inner life from idols and anxiety.
 5. Secrecy—Doing and experiencing good things without letting anyone know to build humility and keep God's glory a priority.

6. Confession—Admitting to God your specific sins to find forgiveness and freedom.
7. Celebration—Engaging physically and mentally in joy-filled activities to find renewed joy and all that goes with it.
8. Customized Habits—Developing new activities for needed training.

1. Meditation—Focusing your thinking on one truth about God as revealed in his Word while learning to hear his voice.

Explanation

We follow God and our character is transformed as we hear his voice and obey. Biblical characters longed to be with God and to meditate on his word. It was like honey (Psalm 119:103). They panted for him (Psalm 42:1). The process of meditating increased their experiential knowledge of God (Exodus 20:19). Meditating on his word sustained and protected them (Psalm 1). Even Jesus focused his life on knowing and experiencing his father (John 5:19, 30; 14:10). Meditation allows for the emotional and spiritual space so that God can transform our hearts. He literally meets with you and speaks to you and teaches you and shapes you (Revelation 3:20). This is not Eastern Mystical Meditation, where the goal is to clear the mind. This is Christian Meditation, where the goal is to focus the mind and fill it with God.

When to Use

When your life is hurried and God's voice seems distant and your soul seems shallow.

Ideas on What to Do

- Set aside time. Meditation is about depth, and that doesn't happen quickly.
- Use the ideas in the "How to Read the Bible—Mediation" section of this class.
- Take one verse or paragraph or story and read it over and over, asking God to show you something about himself. Look at it from many angles. Do it slowly.
- Practice "palms down, palms up." Use your hands as a physical way to focus your thinking. Hold your palms down, and say to God, "I surrender to you." Then specifically say to God things that are weighing you down or sins that you have held on to. Once you have "released" what you were holding onto, turn your palms up. Say to God, "I need from you..." Then finish that. Maybe it is peace, advice, contentment. Just tell him what you think you need.
- Use creation. Get outside, contemplate God as creator and let God move in your soul.
- Do anything you need to focus your thinking on God, so that he has room to speak.

2. **Fasting—Abstaining from food for a period of time to rediscover God as your source of sustenance.**

Explanation

This is not about seeking health benefits, though fasting is certainly a major tool for those. There are different kinds of fasts in the Bible, but the common fast was abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not water. This was what Jesus did (Luke 4:2). The goal is to use the fast to sharpen our focus on God and let him restore our souls. More than any other habit, fasting reveals (Psalm 69:10) what controls us (food, anger, jealousy, lust). It helps us lean on God, who is the only one who can sustain us (Matthew 4:4). It helps us give up our cravings that can soon consume us. There are many other benefits that come from fasting since it leads us to seek God and depend on him (i.e., increased prayer effectiveness, increased concentration, clearer hearing of God's guidance, physical improvement, renewed hope).

When to Use

When there is something other than God that controls your life and your longings, or it influences them too much.

Ideas on What to Do

- Make sure it is God's will for you to fast.
- Determine the type of fast and the length (for your first fast, try a 24 hour fast from lunch to lunch, skipping two meals).
- Break your fast with fruits and vegetables (sometimes juices are smoother).
- Do it secretly, not calling attention to it (Matthew 6:16-18).
- Have a plan for Bible reading during the fast and follow it.
- Spend time when you would normally eat in focused prayer and listening to God.
- Journal your feelings and understandings of God's promptings.

3. **Slowing/Solitude—Removing yourself from busyness and your normal environment to heal and hear God.**

Explanation

For many today, it is a badge of honor to be busy and rushed. To have time is to feel unimportant. Yet hurry and an always-occupied mind shrink the soul. As a wise person said, “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.” Jesus never looks rushed. He was never late. He never multi-tasked. He felt no stress to achieve. Hurry is the enemy to the spiritual life. Instead, Jesus often withdrew and spent time alone (Luke 4; Mark 1:35). Slowing helps us counter our busyness. Solitude frees us from the pressure around (Romans 12:1). Both give you time and emotional space to heal and hear God.

When to Use

When simplicity is absent, your thinking is unclear, your margins are gone, and your nerves are short. When it’s been awhile since you have been alone with God.

Ideas on What to Do

- Place yourself in situations where you must wait in order to cultivate patience.
- Go a day without a watch.
- Force yourself to do one thing at a time (including talking or texting only one person at a time).
- Tell God you trust him to give you time to do all he wants you to do.
- Spend part of your day alone and unplugged. Let your mind wonder. Take a nap.
- Take an entire day (or a few days) away from your normal culture, and relax, refocus, be still (no music, phones, TV, books, just you).
- Let the solitude uncover what the busyness covers, wounds, joys, insecurities. Talk with God. Listen to God (Matthew 6:25, 33).

4. **Simplicity—De-cluttering and downsizing your material life to free your inner life from idols and anxiety.**

Explanation

Simplicity is about an inward reality first, and then an outward (Psalm 62:10). You develop the inward, however, by training with the outward. The main goal is to seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness, and then everything else in life should find its proper order (Matthew 6:33). You must resist the temptation to focus first on simplicity. You focus on the Kingdom and its ways, and you simplify to train to do that. Practicing material simplicity allows God room to free us from the addiction to things and status (Proverbs 11:39; Luke 12:15).

When to Use

When you are anxious because your heart and mind focus on stuff or status before the Kingdom of God.

Ideas on What to Do

- Prayerfully consider every purchase prior to the purchase (Luke 12:15).
- Choose to buy less than the name brand.
- Give away anything you are unwilling to share.
- Filter through your closets and garage and give away items you don't use but others could.
- Get accountability and give up anything you are "addicted" to, anything you have compulsive actions with (food, TV, eating out, etc.).
- Try to borrow things instead of buying them.
- Give away something valuable.
- Stop anything that distracts you from God and his will (job, hobbies, relationships, gadgets, sports, etc.).
- Choose not to replace anything that is not worn out.
- Try to simplify some area of your life for a day or week or as a lifestyle.

5. Secrecy—Doing and experiencing good things without letting anyone know to build humility and keep God’s glory a priority.

Explanation

Our fast-paced, social-networked and media-soaked world celebrates celebrity and attention. We get addicted to attention, and it alters our motives and clutters our hearts. The spot light can warp our decisions and impact our self-worth. It can cause us to seek approval from people instead of looking for it from God (Galatians 1:10, John 12:43). Jesus clearly condemned actions (especially spiritual ones, Matthew 6:5) that were done in order to “be seen by men,” stating that that “seeing” would be your only “reward.” Doing things intentionally in secret stifles this need and trains us to want and rely upon God’s “reward” and his approval.

When to Use

When you struggle with pride or insecurity, and when you have received much praise or you feel slighted by its absence.

What to Do

- Do anything good and keep it a secret.
- Enjoy a phenomenal opportunity or simple accomplishment, but tell no one.
- Donate to a cause with cash and no signature so no one ever knows.
- Spend time praying for someone and never tell him or her.
- Engage these spiritual habits but don’t publicize your efforts (Galatians 1:10).
- Listen to other people’s stories, but resist the urge to trump theirs with yours. Just listen and praise them.
- Don’t tell anything about your life in social media for a period of time (longer than an hour).
- Pour water over your hands and read Ephesians 5:26, where Paul says that Christ loves you (part of the Church) and wants to “make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.” Use the symbol to ask God to cleanse you and allow your imagination to understand how God wants to restore you.
- Let someone else get credit that you deserved.

6. Confession—Admitting to God your specific sins to find forgiveness and freedom.

Explanation

Sin, going against God (actually, trying to be God), is an ugly thing. Unforgiveness is worse. Regret is right up there. Confession is God's gift for healing. It is like grief, which is God's gift to help us recover from loss. We confess as a way to recover from sin. It isn't a hoop we jump through; it is a process that produces something. It transforms us. When we confess, God forgives and removes our guilt. But admitting also releases temptation's power.

When to Use

Whenever you sin, but also whenever your creativity tank is empty and your communication lines with God seem clogged (signs of unconfessed sin).

Ideas on What to Do

- Confess sin as soon as you sin.
- Set aside time every once in a while to allow God to show you unconfessed sin or patterns of sin.
- Confession should be an element of all your worship experiences.
- Know it. Ask God to reveal and clarify any sin in your life (1 Corinthians 2:9-11).
- Own it. Take responsibility for the sin.
- Understand it. Ask two questions, "Why did I do it?" and "What were the consequences?" Figure out the root, and God can help you fill the gap.
- Recommit. Based on your understanding, make new commitments.
- Accept forgiveness. Let God's grace and forgiveness fill you (1 John 1:9). Receive by faith his gift of forgiveness.

7. Celebration—Engaging physically and mentally in joy-filled activities to find renewed joy and all that goes with it.

Explanation

Joy and happiness are primary characteristics of God and a primary desire of God for us. God celebrated when he did things (like creating the world, “and it was good”) and he instituted festivals and ceremonies for his people to celebrate him. Even creation is formed to celebrate (see Psalm 98 where seas clap and mountains praise). We are wired to cheer and we find joy in doing so. We are commanded to rejoice in all situations (Philippians 4:4). Celebration restores life. It frees our spirits. It helps reorient us away from stress and pity and onto God’s goodness and blessings. It opens us to God’s goodness (James 1:2-5). It brings joy, and joy is the goal. It flows from joy, and joy is formed in us as we become Christlike. Celebrations strengthen our joy muscles.

When to Use

When joy is overflowing and when life is stealing your joy.

Ideas on What to Do

- In every corporate worship experience, really engage in singing and praising.
- Take a day to intentionally focus only on God’s good gifts and enjoy them: eat foods you love, laugh, observe, smile (a lot), give thanks, sing loud in the car.
- Throw healthy, God-honoring parties with people you enjoy and who exude life.
- Journal. Celebrate on paper.
- Do something extravagant as a way of training your body to feel pleasure.

8. Customized Habits—Developing new activities for needed training.

There is not an official, God-inspired or all-inclusive, biblical list of spiritual habits. Remember these are tools, so you can use anything that will help you train. Like a sports coach develops all kinds of training tools, you too can develop and customize any activity or discipline that will help.

Here are the steps:

- a. Determine what God wants to shape in your life (1 Peter 2:1-3).
- b. Analyze the causes that are keeping you from experiencing that characteristic.
- c. Choose any “tool” or “habit” that might help you overcome that hurdle and develop that characteristic. If the routine and special habits don’t fit, creatively and prayerfully develop a new one.

For example, if you struggle with thinking of others first (Philippians 2:3), you could train yourself by intentionally passing on the first two best parking spaces you find and taking the third best one every time for a month. That would be a spiritual habit, customized, for your issue. It might work (and it will definitely burn more calories).