On Spiritual Practices

We practice the spiritual practices to have fellowship with our Lord, fellowship with the Spirit within us, and to submit to our God by resisting the devil and drawing near to our God, who then draws near to us (James 4:7-8). Thus, we have fellowship with our God.

The disciplines are not burdensome (1 John 5:3-5). They are the opposite. They are how we fellowship with our God, our Lord, and the Holy Spirit. We engage in them as we are led by the Spirit within us. It is vital for us to proceed this way. We follow the lead of the Spirit in practicing the spiritual disciplines just as we follow His lead in all aspects of life. Our Lord did everything by the Spirit. He threw demons out by the Spirit (Matthew 12:28). He resisted temptation by the Spirit using the scriptures (Luke 4:1-4). We don't know much about how Jesus studied the scripture, but it is very evident in the Gospels that his knowledge was broad and deep. He used the scripture in all kinds of ways, including resisting the devil. Some of these were stunningly creative, as in his parables, or in his answers to those who questioned him, or even while he was hanging on a Roman cross, dying. The Lord did everything by the Spirit, and in the Gospel of John we have a significant body of the Lord's teaching regarding the centrality of the Spirit's role in us (John 14; 16).

Each individual believer should engage in spiritual practices as the Spirit leads him or her. This will be different for different individuals. It depends on what the Spirit wants the individual to do. The goal is not the practices themselves, except for love, which is the Lord's paramount command to us (John 15:9-17). The goal of the practices is to keep living in fellowship with our God, our Lord, and the Spirit within us. We should do what the Spirit leads us to do for each practice. He will lead us. Consequently, some believers will study more than others. We pray also as we are led by the Spirit. However, Paul tells the Ephesians to pray in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18-20). This has to do with the devil's attacks on us (Ephesians 6:10-12). Consequently, we will learn to pray largely through our struggle with the devil. Paul says we need to be alert to the devil's persistent attacks on all believers and pray for them also (Ephesians 6:18). Therefore, prayer is one of the practices that we do continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17). (By "continually" I don't mean every second, but repeatedly or often.) We meditate on the scripture as we are led by the Spirit. We can meditate on the words of Christ on the cross as a spiritual discipline in preparation for Communion. We can also meditate on other portions of scripture in preparation for Communion. The Spirit may reveal the Lord to us as he did for Cleopas and his friend when they saw the Lord breaking bread (Luke 24:30-32). The Spirit opened the two disciples' eyes to finally recognize Jesus whom they had not even recognized. They were overjoyed. So, Jesus was a shepherd to them when they were walking away from the testimony of the women that Jesus was not in the tomb (Luke 24). Also, we fast when we are led to do so by the Spirit, as Jesus did in the wilderness (Luke 4:2). Jesus withdrew to solitude when he was led by the Spirit.

Some of the spiritual practices are done continually. We have highlighted the need to pray continually. Another spiritual practice that is continual is love because this is the Lord's paramount command to us. Love is listed first as the fruit of the Spirit by Paul (Galatians 5:22-23). The Lord's command to us to love one another requires us to abide in the Spirit. Paul takes up this point when he tells the church in Galatia to live by the Spirit, and sow to the Spirit (Galatians 5:16; 6:7-9). If (not when) we obey the Lord's command to love one another, as well as all his other commands, the Lord shows himself to us (John 14:21). And so, we have fellowship with our Lord. This is our highest goal in obeying the Lord's command to love one another, and his other commands as well. We have

a goal in obeying the Lord's commands, and we eagerly anticipate the Lord's fellowship with us. Our reason for obedience is that we love the Lord (John 14:15). Our goal is to have fellowship with him.

We must be alert and self-controlled. These are needed to be ready to stand against the devil's lies and temptations (1 Thessalonians 5:6-8). Resisting the devil is paramount, so we must always be alert to his attacks. Our goal is to make him run (James 4:7). He will flee when we resist him by the scripture, like Jesus did, because he cannot stand the truth. He is like the demons who shake when they are reminded of the truth (James 2:19). Satan will flee when we resist him with the truth of scripture. He does not flee because he is afraid of us now. He is far beyond us in intelligence. He flees because of the Lord's authority. And he does know that in the end we will trample him under our feet (Romans 16:20). This is one of the fulfillments of God's curse of the serpent in Genesis 3:14-15. The offspring of the woman in this verse points not only to us, but even more to the Lord himself who was born as the son of Mary. It is the Lord who has defeated the devil on the cross, but we will participate in his victory when we stomp on the devil's head in the end. This is God's promise to us, according to Paul, and according to the author of Genesis 3. So, resisting the devil's temptations is another spiritual practice that is continual.

According to James, actively resisting the devil is fundamental in our lives because it is part and parcel of our submission to our God, which we do because of His grace (James 4:1-6). Because of God's grace, we submit to our God and resist the devil (verse 7). The result, as we draw near to God like this, is that God draws near to us (verse 8). And so, we attain to our desired goal of fellowship with our God. This is the reason why the spiritual practice of resisting temptation is paramount. It is how we draw near to God, and then He draws near to us. The experience, teaching, and practice of Luther, and others, in this matter is important for us to investigate.

The Spirit will lead us in evangelism, just as he led Philip (Acts 8). The Spirit leads us to share our faith just as he leads us in all spiritual practices, and we will observe life being born right out of the jaws of death. This happens by the power of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:1-5), but we are privileged participants in the spectacle. The devil hates it, but he gets dirt to eat since the Lord has already won the victory over him on the cross. In evangelism, we obey the Lord's Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). The Lord promises to be with us in this undertaking (verse 20). The Spirit will guide us in our role as witnesses to the death and resurrection of the Lord, and we should remember always that it is by the Spirit's power alone that men and women come to faith (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). We should not fear persecution. When we are tempted to be fearful, and the devil will undoubtedly do this, we should remember that the Lord said very succinctly that we are blessed when we are persecuted because our Father will give us the great blessings of the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:17). He will give them to us now and in eternity. We should confess our fears to other believers and ask them to pray for us, like Paul did (Ephesians 6:19-20). If (not when) we are obedient to the Lord's command to make disciples, he shows himself to us (John 14:21). This is our goal, as well as exercising our love toward those with whom we share our faith.

The practices are spiritual, and they are fruitful only if we pursue them under the guidance of the Spirit who lives in us, with the goal of remaining in fellowship with Him as well as the Lord and the Father. Paul urges us not to put out the Spirit's fire by our sin (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Richard Foster states that spiritual growth is the purpose of the practices (*Celebration of Discipline,* 2018*,* p. 8). We would like to refine this statement by highlighting the difference between purposes and goals. Goals are the objectives of our concrete actions. The concrete actions to which we are referring are the spiritual practices. Purposes, in contrast, are overarching intentions to which our goals are aimed. We think that spiritual growth, such as exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit, is a by-product of the practices, which happens by God's grace. Our goal in the practices is to fellowship with the Spirit, with the Lord, and with our God. This must be our focus, our goal.

A fuller explanation is in order. The fruit of the Spirit, which is an aspect of our spiritual growth, is one manifestation of the new creation which the Spirit is working out right now throughout the whole world (Galatians 6:15). Paul stresses the new creation at the end of his letter to the Galatians after he had urged them to live by the Spirit, with his citation of the fruit of the Spirit, followed by his command to sow seed to the Spirit. Therefore, we sow to the Spirit by engaging in the practices as the Spirit leads us, and the fruit of the Spirit is then produced in us by grace, just as Dr. Foster emphasizes (*Celebration*, p. 7). So, the Spirit causes the fruit to grow in us after we sow the seed by spiritual practices. This fruit in us shows that the new creation is underway. It must be stressed that our spiritual growth is in fact God's purpose, and the Spirit's, as part of the glorious new creation that is underway. Our focus, or goal, in the practices is straightforwardly to continue in our fellowship with the Spirit, with the Lord, and with our God. It is on fellowship that we stay focused. Foster fundamentally agrees with this when he emphasizes that we must stay focused on our fellowship with the Lord (*Celebration,* pp. 110-111). I wish to add to this advice that we must also stay focused on our fellowship with the Spirit and with our God. It is my personal conviction that we stay focused on our fellowship with God fundamentally by resisting the devil's temptations (James 4:7-8), and so I have included resisting temptation as a fundamental spiritual practice which is continual. Love is also continual. I wish to add these two practices to Foster's list as central for the believer. Both practices lead us to God's original purpose for the whole world, which is to live in love, but which was interrupted by the action of the devil in the Garden. So now, we stand in the new creation of God, which is taking place through the Spirit. God is restoring the original purposes of creation right now, and this will be culminated on the last day. In this discussion, we have been focused on keeping in step with the Spirit because of the intense focus that Jesus had on the Spirit in the Gospel of John (John 14; 16). Jesus emphasized that we do know that the Spirit lives within us (John 14:17). So, the Spirit satisfies our need and desire for revelation that is continual, and He engages with us continually with His teaching, guiding, counseling, comforting, warning, interceding, prompting, convicting, and reminding us. Therefore, we must not quench His fire but abide in Him by sowing seed to Him. We do this by spiritual practices.

Something needs to be emphasized again as strongly as possible, so that we keep our wheels on track. It is very easy for our wheels to come off the tracks. The New Testament writers stress that our focus must be on obedience to our God, to our Lord, and to the Spirit. The topic of obedience may not strike us as profound at first. Perhaps some think that it's not really what a book-length study should be about, or what the life of an adult should be about. But obedience through love is without a doubt what the New Testament writers stress is at the heart of our lives. We obey the Lord's commands because we love him (John 14:23). Our goal must be to stay focused on our obedience to James' command to resist temptation because this is how we achieve our goal of maintaining our fellowship with the Father. And we must stay focused on Jesus' instruction to us to keep his commands because this is how we achieve our goal of staying in fellowship with our Lord. And we must stay focused on obeying the Holy Spirit who lives within us as His temple because this is how we achieve our goal of maintaining our fellowship with the Spirit. Obedience that flows from love is the deepest topic of theological discussion that is possible. We must stay focused on this in our faith. Our spiritual growth will happen by God's grace. And our good works will flow also from the foundation of our obedience. More will be said about our good works. Our spiritual growth is God's purpose for us, and He is faithful. He will do it through the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Our proper focus must be on our obedience that flows from our love. Our love flows as our response to the grace that has been shown to us (1 John 4:19).

Spiritual practices are the opposite of a burden. They are eternal life (Galatians 6:8). We should let the Spirit teach us the rhythm that He wants for the practices. We should lay aside any

preconceptions we may have about this. We know some of them are to be done continually. The practices are given to us as the means of fellowship with our God, our Lord, and the Spirit who lives within us. Spiritual practices themselves are not our goal except for love, but even love involves a higher goal which is the fellowship of the Lord who shows himself to us if (not when) we keep his commands. We have lofty goals to pursue. Our goals in spiritual practices are life itself.

In connection with the reference to Galatians 6 concerning the new creation, something bears repeating with the greatest emphasis possible. As believers, we crave the simplicity and focus that Jesus displayed in his life. We want to know the formula. The Lord has made it clear that we only need to take the smallest step of faith to find his own simplicity, power, and focus in life. He told us very succinctly that if (not when) we obey his commands, he will show himself to us (John 14:21). Not only do we thereby achieve our goal of fellowship with the Lord, but we also have fellowship with the Father who loves us. The Lord's paramount command was to love one another. We cannot possibly foresee all the wonderful results and all the stunning dynamics of obeying that command since love is indeed the original purpose and reason for creation. We wonder about such things, but then we can act. We should take the smallest step of faith, well within a single stride, and obey the Lord's command to love one another and see what happens. What happens is glorious. The new creation of God is underway, so we must stay in step with how God is remaking all things, indeed through the Lord and through the Spirit, just as He made the creation originally. The other side of the coin which has love on one side is the antidote to the original and current attempt of the devil to attack creation-- which is resisting the devil's temptations. The Spirit will help us to resist the devil's temptations, but He wants us to do it, and our God will draw near to us (James 4:7-8). This is a simple goal in essence, which is not to minimize the vicious difficulty that the devil poses to us. But the goal is clear. These are the two fundamental spiritual practices that put us right in the middle of God's purpose of restoring the damaged creation by creating all things new. This will be culminated on the last day when the new creation is established forever (Revelation 21; 22). So, loving one another and resisting temptation are the two spiritual practices that make us like Christ, whose life causes us to simply marvel. He commands us to follow him in these practices. If we want the "key" that will give us the true and deep simplicity and power that Jesus exhibited in his life, here it is. And by these two practices, we stay focused on our goals of remaining in fellowship with the Lord, with our God, and with the Spirit.

We should not be myopic about one additional dynamic. Our fellowship with our God, and with the Lord, and with the Spirit, and our personal spiritual growth as well, all point to another purpose of our God, which is that we produce good works in the world. The Lord said that we would do the things that he does, and that we would do even greater things than him (John 14:12). Such a statement shocks us. Jesus goes on to say that we can ask him to do anything in his name, and he will do it (verse 14). It is because the Lord has gone to the Father that we can ask for anything in his name (verse 12). The example that comes to mind is Stephen's request to the Lord that the sin of his murderers not be held against them (Acts 7:60). The Lord's response was to appear to Saul a little later and appoint him as an apostle (Acts 9:6). Paul's subsequent ministry was the greatest that the world has ever seen. This is the kind of thing that the Lord was talking about when he said that we would do greater things than him. Nobody, of course, can do what the Lord did by providing the basis of our salvation; this is the greatest work that can possibly be imagined, and it is beyond the imagination. But Jesus is talking about our works in ministry. The scripture says that Stephen was full of the Spirit at the time that he prayed to the Lord (Acts 7:55). This points to the power of prayer, one of the spiritual practices, and we should therefore be encouraged to engage in prayer in the Spirit, like Stephen did. Stephen simply did what Jesus said we should do as he breathed the Holy Spirit upon the disciples after his resurrection-- we should forgive those who sin against us (John 20:22-23). So, we are face-to-face with the stunning outwork of our obedience to the Lord's

commands, our engagement in spiritual practices, and our resistance to the devil's temptations. I would suggest that when Satan brings up our sins to accuse us and thereby attempt to cripple us as effective workers for our God, like he did to Martin Luther, that we thank the devil for reminding us of our sins, in an audible voice right to his face, so that we can go and confess our sins to our God, who will forgive us because of the Lord's death on the cross. Then, we should stop everything and confess our sins to God.

The spiritual practices lead to great works, but our God decides the exact form that these works take. We will do the works that our Lord did, and we will do works that are greater than the Lord's. We should put aside any preconceptions we might have and simply obey our Lord's commands and obey the Spirit who lives in us, like Stephen did. We should be ready to unload on the devil when he shows up to lie to us, and to tempt us to sin. He prowls around incessantly, like a predator, looking for someone to devour. Let's draw near to God, and to the Lord, and to the Spirit and let our God do what is on His mind.

An important text to remember in connection with our works is Acts 2. In this passage we observe Peter, after the Spirit fell upon him and the other apostles during Pentecost, proclaiming the gospel to many fellow Jews who were in Jerusalem from many different countries. We remember Peter's denials of knowing the Lord when Jesus was arrested, but the Lord had reinstated Peter (John 21) and now he was very different. How boldly he preached to those he had feared so greatly! Acts 2:41 says that about three thousand individuals believed in the Lord that day. This is the kind of thing that Jesus was talking about when he said that his followers would do the works that he did, and even greater works than his. Surely Acts 2 exemplifies what Jesus was talking about. Indeed, the Lord had gone to the Father just as he said he would. And Peter's work that day was in fact greater than what the Lord had done. We would do very well to remember this example in scripture.

In keeping with themes in Galatians, one more matter should be discussed. This has to do with finding the proper understanding of freedom and self-discipline in our lives, which includes the way in which we practice self-discipline by engaging in spiritual disciplines. Paul's entire argument in the Epistle to the Galatians has to do with the freedom that the Galatians had from the law. Paul sums this up at five points. In Galatians 5:1 he says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." Then in 5:6 he says, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Then in 5:13, "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love." Then in 5:25, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." Finally, in 6:15, "… what counts is a new creation." We should let these five summaries of Paul's message in Galatians guide us into a proper understanding of freedom and discipline in the Christian life.

First, Galatians 5:1 urges us to abide in our freedom. We are free because Christ has set us free by his sacrificial death for us, and we appropriate that freedom by faith (Galatians 3:2). The injunction to "stand firm" is another instance of Paul's emphasis throughout his epistles on resisting evil, indeed resisting the devil himself. Our focus should be on our God and our Lord who win the victory for us as we resist the devil in a spirit of faith. The background of Paul's phrase "standing firm" is found in the Old Testament scriptures. Several times, the Old Testament speaks of "standing firmly" against the devil's attacks. Moses directed the Israelites to stand firmly against the Egyptian army that was about to attack them on the shores of the Red Sea. The Israelites were instructed to watch God fight for them (Exodus 14:13-14). King Jehoshaphat was also instructed by God to simply stand still in the battlefield and watch God fight for him against the armies of Moab, Ammon, and Edom (2 Chronicles 20:17). Perhaps the best-known king who proceeded something like this was Hezekiah against the huge army of Sennacherib (2 Kings 19; Psalm 46:10). In Galatians

5:1, Paul is stressing the fact that we will be attacked by the devil himself as we pursue our life of faith. The Galatians were tempted to displace their obedience to the Spirit by putting the law in His place. Paul is directing the Galatians to resist this wicked temptation that was designed by the devil to rob them of their freedom and distract them from abiding in the Spirit. We should be alert to the devil's lies and temptations by standing firmly against the liar and resisting his temptations. The devil will flee from us if we stand firmly against him in this manner (James 4:7). By doing this, our God will draw near to us, and we thereby meet our goal of fellowship with our God (James 4:8).

Verse 5:6 emphasizes that what counts is faith expressing itself through love. Love is the Lord's paramount command to us, and we have the promise that if we obey his commands, he will show himself to us (John 14:21). We thereby attain our goal of fellowship with our Lord. We also set into motion the dynamics of love through which we will realize that we are participants in the new creation.

Verse 5:13 again guides us to avoid sin. This is once again a call to resist temptation, so this verse reiterates what we have just discussed about resisting the devil's temptations. Quite often, we should resist the devil audibly to his face when he tempts us in our solitude, like Martin Luther did, and like Jesus did in the wilderness (Luke 4). But this verse also turns our attention to the Spirit because avoiding sin is also a call to live by the Spirit, as Paul immediately stresses in 5:16. In this way, we fulfill our goal of fellowship with the Spirit. Paul, in 5:13, then comes back to emphasizing the Lord's paramount command to us, to love one another by serving one another. In this way, we have fellowship with the Lord by keeping his command, and we open all the dynamics of love by serving other believers. Some of this service pertains to common acts of love, and some of this service involves the exercise of our spiritual gifts. Now we can see the new creation of our God. This is the new creation of God brought about through the Spirit, just as it was in the beginning of creation. Now things are getting too good for us. We don't deserve them, but our God gives them to us by His grace. We are full participants in the new creation, not only in the present but on the last day and forevermore.

Verse 5:25 is another injunction to abide in the Spirit, and this time Paul gives us a key to putting self-discipline in proper perspective. "Keeping in step" with the Spirit is an image of a march, a disciplined walk with the Spirit who is the One by whom we live in the first place. He was given to us at baptism as a gift of God when we declared our faith in Jesus Christ and He lives in us as His temple. Paul is saying we need to be disciplined about living by the Spirit. So, this is the role of self-discipline. Paul is showing that self-discipline relates to abiding in the Spirit who lives in us, and we do know Him (John 14:17). Our focus must be on obeying the Spirit who is engaged in teaching, guiding, counseling, comforting, warning, prompting, convicting, and reminding us. The Spirit also helps us to resist the devil's temptations, but he wants us to do it (James 4:7). Paul is also encouraging us to sow to the Spirit by engaging in the spiritual disciplines (6:8) and by doing good to all people, especially the household of believers (6:9-10). It is the Spirit who makes us full participants in the new creation. We must stay focused on abiding in the Spirit who will guide each of us in the way that our God wants us to go. Our lives will not be carbon copies of anything. The Spirit will guide each of us as God desires. Differences between us show God's plan and creativity in the new creation. It is something like the wonderful variety that we observe in the different animals and plants that populate the earth. But just as the wonderful interaction between all the different species and their environment produces a marvelous ecology in the earth, so our differences as believers produce a wondrous ecology in the Church and in the world, which is the new creation of God through the Spirit. Each of us abides in the Spirit, and exercises our spiritual gifts by the Spirit, and the result is a new creation of God Almighty through the Spirit and through the Lord.

This is what counts (Galatians 6:15).

We offer the following perspective then on the place of the spiritual disciplines and practices in our lives. Richard Foster has identified twelve disciplines in his book *Celebration of Discipline,* and I have added two more which I believe need to be seen as continual disciplines-- so the full list is resisting temptation, love, meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. I wish to add evangelism to this list also. Of these fifteen, five are disciplines to be practiced continually. These include love because love is the Lord's paramount command to us, resisting temptation because this is paramount to maintaining our fellowship with our God (James 4:8), prayer which must be practiced continually for a plethora of reasons, confession of our sins to God and to others against whom we have sinned (this is not as continual but it is urgent and so I am including it as a discipline which requires alertness), and worship because of the injunction not to forsake assembling together with other believers (Hebrews 10:25), and because we participate in Communion as part of our worship.

The other practices are all necessary, and the Spirit will guide us into practicing each of them. We should rely on His guidance for each of them. This will be different for different people. Some might insist that submission and service must be considered disciplines, and I agree that submission is a discipline in so far as we are talking about submitting to God and resisting the devil (James 4:7). Other forms of submission flow out of our submission to God and resisting the devil, but they are sporadic in nature, and the Spirit will guide us into the various forms of submission when they are required. The key for us is to listen to the Spirit's guidance. We know Him (John 14:17). This is how we will maintain our fellowship with the Spirit which is our goal along with our fellowship with the Lord and with our God. And I would regard service as an expression of our love. All the other disciplines in Richard Foster's list are practices into which the Spirit will guide us as He wishes.

The key for us is to obey the Spirit. I am putting the Spirit at the center of our attention because Paul has told us to live by the Spirit and sow to the Spirit. He will guide us, and we do know Him. This is the key for us. We hold on tightly to this key. Our God will give us grace to help us (James 4:6), and the Lord will guard us against the devil (1 John 5:18). Therefore, we will have fellowship with our God, with our Lord, and with the Spirit. This is our focus and our goal which leads to spiritual growth and good works like the Lord did, even works that are greater than the Lord's through his grace and through the grace of our God and the Spirit.

© 2025, 2026 Brad Goral. All rights reserved.