

“Into the Deep”

Responsive Reading, “Spiritual Maturity”¹

What comes to mind when you hear the term, “deep space”? The term appears to have several definitions, including that which is beyond the orbits of the Earth and the Moon, or that which is beyond the limits of our Solar System. Hollywood likes to use the term in sci-fi movies, and of course, nearly everything that astronomers do has to do with “deep space.” Turning in another direction, “deep space” might refer to the vast unplumbed and unexplored regions of the seas on our little blue planet. This morning I want to consider “deep space” with you using both of these “upward” and “downward” images.

Richard Foster, a well-known Quaker author, has noted that with respect to the spiritual life, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. . . . The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for **deep people**.”²

“Perhaps,” he suggests, “somewhere in the subterranean chambers of your life you have heard the call to deeper, fuller living. You have become weary of frothy experiences and shallow teaching. Every now and then you have caught glimpses, hints of something more than you have known. Inwardly you long to launch out into the deep.”³ Does anything in your spirit resonate with these words? Did our *Forty-Day Journey of Spiritual Transformation* stir such yearning? I hope so, and that’s what we’re thinking about this morning.

I actually hope that you feel a rather intense desire to launch out into the “deep space” of the Spirit and to encounter God in richer and more powerful ways. And the good news is that any such longing that you sense, whether great or small, is evidence of God’s presence and invitation already at work in your spirit.

The truth of the matter is that you and I are frequently content to settle for far less than God desires to give us. Much of what passes for “conversion” in our lives is light years away from the spiritual transformation God desires to bring to birth in us.⁴ And there’s no place for pridefulness in any of us, because, no matter how far we’ve come from where we started, none of us will ever be anything but beginners in the Way of Jesus.

There is actually very little in the way of transformation that you and I can accomplish on our own; but happily, the transformation for which we yearn is a grace that is given, not earned.⁵ Even though this is true, you and I don’t simply wait passively for transformation to occur. There is still work that we must do, and preparation that we must make, if God’s transformation is to take root in our lives, and that work is what we’re thinking about this morning.

Consider the work of a farmer. Although modern farmers have many tools and techniques at their disposal, the truth of the matter is that nothing a farmer does is able to actually cause a seed to grow. What farmers do is to create conditions in which it is possible for seeds to grow. And that’s the work that we have to do in spiritual growth: there are a number of things we *can* do—and some that we *must* do—in order to put ourselves in a condition in which God is able to transform us. These “conditioners” are generally known as “spiritual disciplines.”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 10, 2016.

² Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, revised and expanded (Harper & Row, 1978, 1988), p. 1.

³ Foster, p. 2.

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (HarperCollins, 1988), p. 70.

⁵ Foster, p. 6.

Spiritual disciplines are behaviors that make space in our lives for God.⁶ Spiritual disciplines are activities that we undertake to bring us into more effective cooperation with the Way of the Spirit. Spiritual disciplines are the doors through which we enter the “deep space” for which our spirits yearn. Further, by God’s grace, spiritual disciplines make us capable of receiving more and more of God’s life and power without harm to ourselves or others.⁷

As we begin, it’s important to realize that, by themselves, spiritual disciplines don’t accomplish transformation. Spiritual disciplines move us to a place where transformation *can* occur. Spiritual disciplines might be called “the path of disciplined grace.” Their path is “grace” because it is freely given by God; it is “disciplined” because there are things for us to do.⁸

We could also regard this journey of spiritual transformation as a journey toward holiness. Paul put it this way: “*I urge you, brothers and sisters, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, **holy** and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. **Then** you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will*” (Romans 12:1-2).

Such holiness as this is not a condition into which we drift.⁹ Holiness is both a condition to which we aspire and a process to which we submit ourselves. Along the way, holiness introduces us to the basic rhythms and steps of the Divine Dance which is the wondrous Eternal Life of the Trinity. Holiness is the door. “*Be holy,*” our Lord says, “*because I am holy*” (1 Peter 1:16).

Let me say again that it is not the spiritual disciplines themselves that transform us into the likeness of Christ. Without the work of God’s Spirit within, spiritual practices accomplish very little. Indeed, disciplines done for the wrong reasons actually sabotage our transformation and deaden our spirits rather than enlivening them. If we use spiritual practices to gain secondary things like spiritual cachet, success, approval, or respect, we rob the disciplines of their God-given graces and end up in a worse place than we were before.¹⁰

Spiritual practices don’t give us “brownie points” or help us “work the system” for an eventual “passing grade” from God. Spiritual disciplines simply put us in a place where we can begin to respond to God more deeply and more fully. Spiritual disciplines give the Holy Spirit space to work in our souls. Through this divine transformation, the Spirit helps us move into the “unforced rhythms of grace” that take us deeper into God’s Eternal Life.¹¹

It’s very important to recognize that the time-tested disciplines of the spiritual life are not just for spiritual “giants” and therefore beyond our own reach. These disciplines are for ordinary human beings such as we are: people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes, mow lawns, and shovel snow. Actually, these disciplines are most effectively exercised right in the middle of our relationships with our husbands and wives, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors. The disciplines can become normal parts of ordinary-but-God-directed life.¹²

⁶ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005), preface.

⁷ Willard, p. 156.

⁸ Foster, pp. 7-8.

⁹ John R. Stott, cited in Calhoun, p. 200.

¹⁰ Calhoun, p. 18.

¹¹ Calhoun, p. 19.

¹² Foster, p. 1.

Nor should we think of spiritual disciplines as dull drudgeries whose sinister purpose is to exterminate laughter and joy from our own lives and from the earth itself. While some sad folk do have such an understanding, the truth is that **joy is the truest sign of the Presence of God**, and *the disciplines are shot-through with joy*. Singing, dancing, even shouting (dare I say “**WooHoo!**?”) routinely characterize progress in the spiritual life.¹³

Well, I hope that I’ve increased your interest in spiritual disciplines at least a little bit. While it’s true that the disciplines are joy-full, it’s also true that they involve intentionality, purpose, and resolve. Anything worth learning requires discipline, and we would be foolish to expect that progress in the Life of the Spirit would be easier than learning to play the piano or to speak Japanese.

There are any number of ways to organize the generally-recognized spiritual disciplines. Adele Calhoun organizes them using the acronym, “**WORSHIP**.”¹⁴ Richard Foster organizes them as “*Inward Disciplines*,” “*Outward Disciplines*,” and “*Corporate Disciplines*.”¹⁵ And Dallas Willard organizes them as “*Disciplines of Abstinence*” and “*Disciplines of Engagement*.”¹⁶ In the time that remains, I’m going to say a little bit about just two of the dozens of spiritual disciplines: prayer and silence. This will be no more than the briefest of introductions to these disciplines, but I’ll add several other resources with the online version of this sermon.

Before I describe these disciplines, I should note that one of the disciplines we tend to think of most often and most stereotypically is the Discipline of Fasting. Sandra Gray wrote a very nice piece on fasting for us while Pastor Bob was here, and I’ll attach that to the online sermon as well.

1. Prayer. Those who walk closely with God have always viewed prayer as the Main Business of their lives. Prayer was not a small habit tacked onto the periphery of their lives. It was and is their lives.¹⁷

Of all the spiritual disciplines, prayer is perhaps the most central because it invites us into perpetual friendship and conversation with God. Indeed, *prayer is the primary channel God uses to transform us*.¹⁸

¹³ Foster, p. 2.

¹⁴ **WORSHIP:** Celebration; Gratitude; Holy Communion; Rule for Life; Sabbath; Worship. **OPEN MYSELF TO GOD:** Contemplation; Examen; Journaling; Practicing the Presence; Rest; Retreat; Self-Care; Simplicity; Slowing; Teachability; Unplugging. **RELINQUISH THE FALSE SELF:** Confession and Self-Examination; Detachment; Discernment; Secrecy; Silence; Solitude; Spiritual Direction; Submission. **SHARE MY LIFE WITH OTHERS:** Accountability Partner; Chastity; Community; Covenant Group; Discipling; Hospitality; Mentoring; Service; Small Group; Spiritual Friendship; Unity; Witness. **HEAR GOD’S WORD:** Bible Study; Devotional Reading; Meditation; Memorization. **INCARNATE THE LOVE OF CHRIST:** Care of the Earth; Compassion; Control of the Tongue; Humility; Justice; Stewardship; Truth Telling. **PRAY:** Breath Prayer; Centering Prayer; Contemplative Prayer; Conversational Prayer; Fasting; Fixed-Hour Prayer; Inner-Healing Prayer; Intercessory Prayer; Labyrinth Prayer; Liturgical Prayer; Prayer Partners; Praying Scripture; Prayer of Recollection; Prayer Walking.

¹⁵ **INWARD DISCIPLINES:** Meditation; Prayer; Fasting; Study. **OUTWARD DISCIPLINES:** Simplicity; Solitude; Submission; Service. **CORPORATE DISCIPLINES:** Confession; Worship; Guidance; Celebration.

¹⁶ **DISCIPLINES OF ABSTINENCE:** Solitude; Silence; Fasting; Frugality; Chastity; Secrecy; Sacrifice. **DISCIPLINES OF ENGAGEMENT:** Study; Worship; Celebration; Service; Prayer; Fellowship; Confession; Submission.

¹⁷ Foster, p. 34.

¹⁸ Foster, p. 33.

As I'm sure you know, prayer is simply conversation with God, and it involves listening at least as much as it does speaking. While there is nothing at all wrong with telling God about our needs, projects, ideas, and programs, and inviting God's involvement in these things, the deepest and most powerful prayer is not of this sort.

Many find that their most powerful experiences of prayer come in the form of simply sitting in the presence of God and giving God our undivided attention and love. In such "centering prayer," the goal is to so dwell in Christ that the fruit of this dwelling begins to show up in our lives. Later, as we move out into the busyness of life, we begin to notice that something has shifted within. Our quiet center in Christ holds fast.¹⁹

Such prayer is a way of being with God that does not depend on giving God information about what we would like done in the world. Just as friends can enjoy one another's company without conversing, contemplative prayer is a way of being with God without words. We rest in God, depending on God to initiate conversation as needed. We simply rest . . . and wait.²⁰

In such transformative prayer we seek God first and God only. We do not seek peace, quiet, tranquility, or enlightenment. We do not seek anything for ourselves or for others. Our purpose is to open ourselves entirely to God, Who is the Beginning and End of our prayer."²¹

Adele Calhoun suggested this lovely prayer as a way to initiate such listening: "Lord, I am willing to receive what you give, release what you take, lack what you withhold, do what you require, and be who you desire. Lord Christ, take those things that evil one would use to discourage and destroy, and turn them to my good, my growth, and your glory. Amen."²²

2. Silence & Solitude. Closely related to the Disciplines of Prayer are the Disciplines of Silence & Solitude. Many people in our frenetic world these days have never experienced real silence and don't even know that they don't know what it is.²³

I suspect that you've discovered that it's difficult to find silence in an age like ours, filled as it is with email, text messages, tweets, alarms, conference calls, and smartphone reminders. It's often the case that even relative silence makes us so uncomfortable that we try to fill it with sounds of some sort. But with so many words and so many noises, it becomes more and more difficult to recognize what is most important. What we really need is time alone with God (Solitude) and many fewer words (Silence).²⁴

While we may be unfamiliar with Solitude as a spiritual discipline, most of us can remember solitude as something we desired and delighted in when we were first in love. Sometimes we called it "Honeymoon Salad": "Let Us Alone!"

It didn't matter then whether the time spent together accomplished anything useful or important to others. Time together was simply the way in which we let our beloved know that he or she mattered deeply to us. And so it is with God.²⁵

Silence offers a way of paying attention to God and to what God brings to the surface of our souls. In quietness we're sometimes able to notice things we would rather not notice or

¹⁹ Calhoun, p. 208.

²⁰ Calhoun, p. 212.

²¹ Calhoun, p. 207.

²² Calhoun, p. 101.

²³ Willard, p. 163.

²⁴ Calhoun, p. 108.

²⁵ Calhoun, p. 112.

feel—but that need to be noticed and felt. And, of course, everything we notice in Silence can become an invitation to prayer.

There's nothing we need to do in the silence. Silence is not a time to come up with strategies for improving our lives. Silence is a time to rest in God; so try to let yourself lean into God in the silence, trusting that being with God in silence will loosen your rootedness in the world and plant your spirit beside eternal streams of living water.²⁶

Well, there's MUCH more that could be said, but time slips away. Here's what I'd like you to remember about all this:

What God wants for your life more than anything else, my friend, is for your life to be filled with the Presence and Power of God. God wants to so shape your character in the here-and-now that you're willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him, and God wants you to use that character to participate in God's redemption of the world in the here-and-now.

The spiritual disciplines practiced by followers of Jesus across the centuries are quite able to accomplish these purposes in our lives, but they won't work unless we work them. It's pretty easy, after all, to allow simply showing up at church—as worthy and important as that is—to substitute for additional practices that have the power to transform our lives. We tell ourselves that we're "too busy for spiritual disciplines," but the fact of the matter is that **God has given us enough time to do what God intends for us to be doing.**

The wonderful news in all this is that Jesus has not stopped acting and speaking. He is alive and at work in our world right now—*today*. Jesus is not idle, nor has He developed laryngitis. He is alive and among us as our Priest to forgive us, our Prophet to teach us, our King to rule us, and our Shepherd to guide us.²⁷

As we practice the disciplines of the Spirit, our relationship with God is transformed from a nice theological idea into a radiant reality. "He walks with me and talks with me" ceases to be merely a nice Gospel Song and becomes a straightforward description of our daily lives.²⁸ Don't you want to have that happen in your life? Look! He is at the door! Will you let Him in?

²⁶ Calhoun, pp. 108-109.

²⁷ Foster, pp. 18-19.

²⁸ Foster, p. 19.

Spiritual Maturity

Leader: *"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (Ephesians 1:17).*

People: ***"We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (Hebrews 5:11-12).***

Leader: *"Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:13-14).*

People: ***"For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:8).***

Leader: *"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love" (2 Peter 1:5-7).*

People: ***"For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:8).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God!

People: **Thanks be to God!**

END NOTES

- i Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 102.
- ii Horatio Richmond Palmer, "Yield Not to Temptation," *Songs of Zion* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1982), 62.
- iii Christian J. Gardner, "Hungry for God," *Christianity Today* Vol. 43 Issue 4 (April 5, 1999): 32.
- iv Ibid.
- v John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 42.
- vi John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer*, 44 - 45.
- vii Ibid., 49.
- viii Ibid., 48.
- ix Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount: Revised Edition* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1970), 77.
- x Ibid., 80.
- xi James Lee Beall, *The Adventure of Fasting: A Practical Guide* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1974), 22 - 23.
- xii Joseph F. Wimmer, *Fasting in the New Testament: A Study in Biblical Theology*, ed. Lawrence Boadt, (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 52.
- xiii Ibid., 53.
- xiv Ibid., 32 - 33.
- xv Mark Buchanan, "Go Fast and Live," *Christian Century* Volume 118 Issue 7 (February 28, 2001): 16.

Another moderate fasting option involves eliminating the following from your diet:

- Sugar
- Red meat
- Caffeine
- Alcohol



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FASTING

DEFINITION

"Fast or fasting is the abstinence from food for the purposes of religious devotion and spiritual discipline."ⁱ The following verses to the hymn, "Yield Not to Temptation," provide an introduction to the question, why fast?

*"Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin;
each victory will help you some other to win;
Fight valiantly onward, dark passions subdue;
Look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.
To those who o'er cometh, God giveth a crown;
Thro' faith we will conquer, tho' often cast down;
He who is our Savior, our strength will renew;
Look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through."*ⁱⁱ

BACKGROUND

Christians refer to the Old and New Testament for Biblical support for spiritual fasting. Two passages in the Old Testament that highlight fasting are "Exodus 24:18; 34:28, where Moses went on two 40-day fasts during his mountaintop experience with God; and Esther 4:16, where Esther asked the Jews to fast from food and water for three days, culminating in their dramatic rescue."ⁱⁱⁱ

In the New Testament, certainly the best-known account of fasting is Jesus' 40-day fast. It came after his baptism, ended with his temptation by Satan, and was a prelude to his public ministry (Matthew 4:1-2; Luke 4:1-2). Another mention of fasting is Jesus' instructing his disciples on what to do "when you fast" (Matthew 6:16-18).^{iv} Protestants refer to these scriptures when providing a biblical rationale for spiritual fasting.

PROTESTANT FASTING

For Protestants, "Christian fasting is a hunger for all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).^v

According to John Piper, a dedicated Baptist, Christian fasting is a way of demonstrating, periodically, that experiencing God more fully exceeds possessing the gifts God gives. Protestants feel that Christians should fast from time to time to examine whether they have begun to love God's gifts in place of Him.^{vi}

God draws Protestant Christians to the practice of fasting in order to know more of God in Jesus. Protestants seek to experience more of His presence and power, as well as be centered in Him.^{vii} This is what Paul makes clear in his portrayal of the Christian life – including fasting: “I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.”^{viii}

Fasting serves several purposes for Protestants, but not all Protestants agree with all the outcomes of fasting. Prayer and fasting enable Christians to tap into their internal sources of power in order to be truthful and genuine and without pretense in their transactions with others.^{ix}

Clarence Jordan, a Baptist New Testament Scholar, asserts that fasting will eliminate time consuming practices enabling people to move faster or speed up their progress toward spiritual growth, achieve a major purpose and/or other goals. Fasting enables people to focus and be open to receiving God. Jesus’ desire was that people fast “toward the Father.” When the spirit of Jesus Christ lives in Christians, fasting enables them to make the kingdom of God their main focus. Total faithfulness to Jesus and his kingdom is the heart of the Protestant Christian’s fast.^x

FASTING AS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Fasting unlocks pathways of spiritual insight and understanding that are not obtainable during the rapid pace of routine living according to prominent fasters (Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, and many more). They discovered that through thoughtful self – control they could listen to God and achieve clarity of direction from God. Because eating represents that which is very important, by foregoing food in order to seek out God, Christians are acknowledging that He is more critical than everything else.^{xi}

Known for his messages on fasting, St. Leo the Great affirmed: “There are three things which most belong to religious actions, namely prayer, helping the needy, fasting – these three things are really one; fasting is the soul of prayer, and helping the needy is the life-blood of fasting.”^{xii} Matthew 6:2–6 and 16–18 provide the basis for this connection between almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, which has lasted until today.^{xiii} Prayer, alms, fasting – if done with the heart paying attention to God – will transform our hearts. We will not only be moved toward God, but toward loving and helping our brother. ^{xiv} In other words, by fasting we are taught in a practical way to care for the oppressed, the homeless and less fortunate.^{xv}

CONCLUSION

The foundation for fasting is Biblically based. While Catholics have formal guidelines and expectations for fasting written into their rules for all faithful members, Protestants are free to fast or not. Today, Catholics and liturgical Protestant denominations share similar days for fasting (Advent and Lent), but Christians also exercise freedom to fast for their personal spiritual growth, development, and relationship with God. Catholics and Protestants who fast value the spiritual discipline because of its profound impact on their lives.

Having fasted, many Christians experience an enhanced prayer life, forgiveness for their sins, an eagerness to help those in need, spiritual renewal, an ability not to yield to temptation, an increased capacity to overcome challenges, clarity on issues, and a clearer understanding of the path appropriate for them. These are exceptionally good reasons to fast!

LEVELS OF FASTING

Traditional Christians recognize five levels of fasting:

1. Abstaining from meat
2. Abstaining from meat, eggs, milk, butter, and cheese
3. Abstaining from meat, eggs, milk, butter, cheese, and fish
4. Abstaining from meat, eggs, milk, butter, cheese, fish, oil, and wine
5. Abstaining from all foods and beverages except bread, water, juices, honey, and nuts.

Note that the fifth and strictest level describes John the Baptizer’s diet, and it may very well have been the fast that Jesus undertook for forty days in the wilderness. To fast, just omit an item or two from your diet—something that you would normally eat during the course of the day. Every time you get an appetite for those items, you will be reminded of your fast and that will remind you of the reason for your fast, and you can pray instead of eating. This can have immense spiritual benefit. You are simply using your belly as a spiritual snooze-alarm.

*Fast whenever you need intensive prayer. Your appetite acts as a prayer alarm; instead of eating your usual treat, you pray. That keeps you focused all day long.