

 THE FOCUSED PASTOR™



PASTOR

# 6 Spiritual Disciplines of Healthy Pastors

DONALD S. **WHITNEY**

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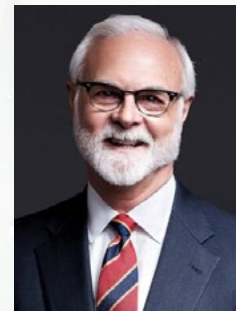
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Rather, **discipline yourself** for the purpose of godliness

**1 TIMOTHY 4:7b**





The first priority of a man of God is to be a godly man. But how does a pastor—who is, above all things, to be a man of God—progress in godliness (also known as holiness, Christlikeness, and sanctification)?

Before answering that question, let me remind you that just being in the ministry will not make you more godly. In fact, the ministry can be the means of making you more ungodly if you are not actively, intentionally pursuing godliness.

A pastor, like all other Christians, grows more godly by means of rightly-motivated obedience to the God-given command in 1 Tim, 4:7:

***“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness”***  
*(NASB).*

The practical, everyday ways we live out obedience to this command have historically been referred to as “spiritual exercises,” “spiritual practices,” or more commonly today, “spiritual disciplines.”

## CHAPTER 1

# What Are the **Spiritual Disciplines?**

The spiritual disciplines are the practices found in the Bible that promote godliness. They consist of *personal* spiritual disciplines (those we practice alone) and interpersonal ones (those we practice with other believers). Thus, private prayer or worship are personal disciplines, and prayer or worship with others are interpersonal ones. Though the interpersonal disciplines are at least as important as the personal ones, this book focuses on a pastor's practice of the personal spiritual disciplines.

It's easy to believe that if we practice the disciplines found in Scripture, then we are godly. But **that was the deadly error of the Pharisees.**

These hypocrites diligently practiced many biblical disciplines, but Jesus said they were the epitome of ungodliness. To them, the disciplines were merely deeds to do, and doing them meant they were godly and pleasing to God. What they missed was that the external practice of the disciplines is not the measure of godliness, but the means to it. Godliness is being like Jesus and is characterized by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), not merely by how often or well you practice the disciplines designed to develop godliness.

To put it another way, God has chosen the means—the biblical spiritual disciplines—through which we experience and enjoy Him and are changed by Him. These are the “sacred pathways” where we can expect to encounter Him. Zacchaeus, we might say, wanted to meet Jesus and—knowing the path Jesus would take—put himself in that path. In His grace, Jesus welcomed Zacchaeus' desire to meet Him and transformed him. Our role, therefore, is to discipline ourselves to get on the God-ordained paths where we can expect by faith to meet Jesus.

Nothing about this is automatic or mechanical, as the Pharisees believed. We must rely on the Holy Spirit and seek Christ by faith when we engage in the disciplines. Nevertheless, it is true that there is no consistent growth in grace apart from the practice of the biblical spiritual disciplines.

We are not called to spiritual passivity, where we do nothing to seek God and just wait on Him to “zap” us with godliness when He is ready. Rather, He has given us a



command: “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.”

And although God gives us the desire to do that, He doesn’t do it for us. We are to discipline ourselves. And since this is a Spirit-inspired command, **it must be possible** to obey it without legalism, but **by Spirit-empowered effort**.

## Are the Spiritual Disciplines for Pastors?

Remember that “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” was written first to Timothy, a missionary associate of the apostle Paul who was serving in the role of a pastor in Ephesus. So the spiritual disciplines are for you, pastor, not just for your people.

### For your own growth in godliness

It is not as though your people will grow spiritually and become more Christlike by practicing the spiritual disciplines, but you will grow by virtue of being in the ministry and preaching sermons. No, pastor you are a Christian first and a minister second. And you will grow in grace the same ways that all believers do—by means of the biblical spiritual disciplines.

In fact, a good argument can be made that pastors should be devoted to the disciplines even more than their people. The work of the ministry can provide many opportunities for spiritual growth because it necessarily requires the immersion of your life in the things of God. On the other hand, without engaging in the spiritual disciplines that promote godliness in your own soul, eventually the discouragements, pressures, and routines of ministry will make you more ungodly, turning you into a prideful professional, an ogre at home, or a hypocrite in the pulpit.

**Your own holiness is your first priority** and greatest asset in the ministry. **Holiness is pursued and developed** through the means God has given: the disciplines by which we experience His presence and grace.



## For blessing and power in ministry

Pastors also need to practice the biblical disciplines to enjoy the blessing and power of God in ministry. Can we expect to help others grow in grace and closer to Christ without doing so ourselves? Can we expect the Lord to cause our church to flourish spiritually if we neglect the means of godliness in our own lives?

Puritan pastor and theologian William Perkins warned pastors of stepping into the pulpit with “unclean feet to handle the holy things of God with unwashed hands.” This is exactly what we do when we attempt to preach and pastor without the holiness that comes only through the Spirit-filled practice of the spiritual disciplines.

Yes, pastoral ministry places overwhelming demands on us and our time. But whatever you do, **don't let the ministry keep you from Jesus.**

## To be an example to the flock

A third reason pastors must practice the spiritual disciplines is to fulfill their responsibility to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3), that is, examples of Christlikeness and of how to live as a Christian. This includes being an example in your personal piety, showing people how to experience God and grow in godliness through the biblical practices designed for these purposes.

Your people need to “see your progress” (1 Tim. 4:15) in devotion to and conformity to Christ. Your flock needs to know that their shepherd consistently spends time with the



Chief Shepherd. They want your words and your life to say, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Pastor, think back to when the Lord called you to His service. Recall your passion for Him when you first began your pastoral ministry. Likely those were days of much sweet communion with Jesus. Have the passing of the years, the increase in responsibilities, and burdens of ministry hardened your heart? Made you more cynical? Caused you to rely more on your skills and experience than on the fruit of time spent in the pursuit and enjoyment of God?

Have you “abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev. 2:4)? Then “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first” (Rev. 2:5).

**Return to** the spiritually-refreshing, joy-giving, ministry-empowering practice of **experiencing God** through the biblical spiritual disciplines.

## CHAPTER 2

# Why Pastors Should be Called to **Spiritual Disciplines?**

Spiritually tepid pastors do not produce spiritually fervent churches. For this reason, in the previous chapter, I wrote that pastors—called to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3)—should be the best examples of Christlikeness among the people of Christ.

It was first to a *minister* (Timothy) that God inspired the apostle Paul to write: “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7, NASB). The biblical means by which pastors (and all Christians) obey this command have been called the “spiritual disciplines.” These are the practices found in Scripture that promote holiness. (I am using the terms Christlikeness, godliness, and holiness synonymously).

## The Pharisees practiced spiritual disciplines

Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees teaches us that the mere outward—even consistent—performance of the disciplines by spiritual leaders is not what it means to “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” Their faulty understanding of spirituality was: practicing the disciplines = godliness. But while practicing the biblical disciplines is not the definition of godliness, it is the *means* to it. Like the Pharisees, if our spiritual practices do not lead to more love for God, love for others, and faithfulness to God’s Word, then there’s a problem. And it’s probably in our hearts.

On the one hand, we should realize that reading the Bible, praying, and practicing the other biblical disciplines will not *automatically* make us any more godly than the Pharisees. And yet on the other, ***we should not expect any progress in godliness apart from these disciplines***, including most of the same ones practiced by the Pharisees.

We’re to practice these disciplines **as the means to—** and **“for the purpose of”**—godliness.

## Our people need our holiness

No Christian needs the godliness that comes by the rightly motivated practice of the spiritual disciplines more than a pastor. As the influential Scottish minister Robert Murray McCheyne (1813–1843) reportedly said, “My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness.” While no one seems to be able to verify this as originating with McCheyne, he



certainly did write, “It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.”

If a pastor isn't holy, his flock will not be either. The level of spirituality in the church will not rise above the spirituality of the pastor. And the spirituality of a pastor is **directly connected to his practice of the spiritual disciplines.**

## Ministry can dull our hearts

Without a spiritually disciplined pursuit of holiness, the work of pastoral ministry can anesthetize our hearts to the holiness of our work, as it often did to Old Testament priests. Their daily familiarity with the ministry of the priesthood tended to dull their awareness of the holiness of their work.

Then some godly believer from an outlying village would bring to the temple a lamb as an offering of his devotion to God. In one of the most meaningful moments in his life, he would give with trembling hands his sacrifice to the priest, only to have it taken from him like a man would grab a sack of fertilizer from the tailgate of a pickup. The priest would turn and do his duty, then turn again, shaking the bloody water from his hands with a passionless “Next,” as the humble believer backed away, stunned by how this priestly professional has just “ministered” to him.

Brothers, the routines of our ministerial responsibilities can likewise callous our hearts to the holiness of our calling. The relentlessness of sermon preparation can deaden our zeal for the ministry of preaching. The endless stream of



meetings can obscure our vision for the Great Commission. Conflict among our people can destroy our faith in Christ's promise to build His church. The routines of administration can desensitize us to the "vine work" of the ministry. The ceaseless obligations of hospital visitation, counseling, weddings, and funerals can wear down our passion for time with God. Division over cultural and political issues can make us want to quit the ministry altogether. Even our home life can harden our hearts if there are family pressures.

Every pastor struggles to a greater or lesser degree with all these things. The apostle Paul battled them (and others), and he knew Timothy would too. More importantly, God knows our stresses in pastoral ministry. So He inspired Paul to write to Timothy (and us) how to keep the "elephants" of ministry off his air hose: "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness."

### The spiritual disciplines awaken our hearts

The only way to maintain perseverance and joy in ministry is to find joy continually in knowing God. Jesus once sent 72 of His disciples on a short-term mission trip (Lk. 10:1-12). They "returned with joy" (v. 17), giving reports of great spiritual victories saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" Jesus sincerely rejoiced with them, but added, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In other words, not even the evident blessing of God on our work—much less the many discouragements and frustrations—is the place to look for joy in ministry. Rather our relationship with God should be the source of our joy, not the ups and downs of ministry.

But if, by means of the spiritual disciplines, we do not consistently cultivate our joy in the fact that our "names are written in heaven" and all that implies, the circumstances of ministry will most definitely steal it.

God typically and most predictably uses **specific means** to increase our joy, spiritual strength, and likeness to Jesus.

He usually works through these same means to give us a sense of His love and an awareness of His presence. These means, of course, are the biblical spiritual disciplines, and

that's why neglecting them starves our soul and leaves us to face the pressures of ministry with the feeble resources of the flesh.

Yes, sometimes the Lord graciously encourages us through an act of providence—a surprising success, a timely word, an unexpected blessing, a remarkable provision—and we should be thankful for these tokens of His mercy. But He most ordinarily and consistently prefers to strengthen our souls and grant us experiences of Himself through the means He designed for these purposes, the spiritual disciplines.

## Seek . . . seek

Pastor, have you ever noticed the command of Psalm 105:4? It says, “Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually!” The beginning point of doing this is an inclination of the heart, that is, a spiritual desire to experience the Lord, His strength, and His presence. Beyond this, though, how do you actually “seek” these blessings? It is by using the God-given means of finding them: the spiritual disciplines.

Brother, *don't let the ministry keep you from Jesus.*

## CHAPTER 3

# Reading and Praying Scripture as a **Spiritual Discipline**

In the last chapter, I addressed why pastors should feel a call to the spiritual disciplines. Pastors cannot care well for the souls of others if they neglect the care of their own souls. So pastors, how do you care for your soul and go about “building yourselves up in your most holy faith” (Jude 20)?

The two most important *personal* spiritual disciplines for all Christians—including pastors—are the disciplines of **the Word** and **prayer**, in that order. It’s more important for us to **hear from God through His Word** than for God to hear from us in prayer.

The disciplines of the Word are—in ascending order of difficulty—hearing, reading, studying, meditating on, memorizing, and applying the Scriptures.

## Reading the Bible

Pastor, have you read the *entire* Bible? In His temptation experience in Matthew 4, Jesus responds famously to Satan’s first temptation by quoting Deut. 8:3, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Notice “every word.” How can you *live* “by every word that comes from the mouth of God” if you have never even *read* “every word that comes from the mouth of God”?

How can you *preach* “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 4:27) if you’ve never *read* “the whole counsel of God”?

Since “*all* Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16, emphasis added), shouldn’t we read it *all*?

Because the home and church in which I was raised emphasized daily Bible reading, I may have read the entire Bible before I finished seminary, but if I did, it wasn’t “systematic.” That is, I didn’t follow an organized plan to take me through the entire Bible. It wasn’t until the summer after my graduation that I became convicted about this and established a Bible reading plan. By God’s grace, I’ve continued this practice at least annually ever since, and it has been the most influential habit of my entire personal life and ministry.

Only in exceptional cases should there be anyone under our





spiritual leadership who has read through the Bible as many times as we have (unless, of course, you are a very young minister). And as we've emphasized in the first two chapters, since pastors are called to be "examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3), can we expect our people to consistently read "every word that comes from the mouth of God" if we do not?

We have the responsibility to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2), teach from it, and lead by it.

God's Word is **the authority** behind all our work, **the guide** for all our ministry, and **the means** by which we conform to the Shepherd of the sheep.

All this requires an ongoing saturation in all of God's revealed truth.

This book for pastors is founded on the apostle Paul's admonition to Timothy—a minister—in 1 Tim. 4:7, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." In the pursuit of godliness, no factor is more influential in making us more like the Son of God than the Spirit of God working through the Word of God. If you want to become more like Jesus Christ and lead His people as He would, discipline yourself to read the Bible. All of it. Regularly.

## **Meditating on the Bible**

The greatest single devotional need of most Christians, in my opinion, is *meditation* on Scripture. If it were within my power to change the devotional life of every Christian on the planet, it would be here.

That's because there appears to be an almost universal

problem when it comes to the intake of Scripture. I've found it to be true even among our most devoted daily Bible readers, including pastors. It looks like this: whether they read one, three, or ten chapters, as soon as they close their Bible they would often have to admit, *I don't remember a thing I've read*. Most assume the problem is their memory, their education, or their IQ. I maintain that even if there is a problem with one of these, the main problem is their *method*.

The method of most Christians it seems is to merely *read* the Bible. As I've noted above, that's the indispensable starting place. But for far too many, it is also the ending place. *Reading* is the *exposure* to Scripture, but *meditation* is the *absorption* of Scripture. And it is the absorption of Scripture that leads to the experience with God and transformation of life that we long for when we come to the Scriptures. The problem is simply that we do not meditate on Scripture after we read it.

If it takes you, say, two seconds to read each verse of your chosen passage for the day, you can read a thousand verses—at two seconds each—and not remember a thing you've read. Why? Well, what do you ever remember that you look at for two seconds? Rarely anything. The problem is not your memory; it's your method.

**Reading** the treasures of truth in the Bible without meditating on them is like putting diamonds into a bag with holes. **Meditation** sews up those holes. We tend to remember little of what we read but retain more what we pause to think about.

The Lord, in places such as Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1:2, told Joshua and David (and us) to meditate “day and night” on His Word. How could He expect that of men who also had the God-given responsibilities to be the civic, military, judicial, and spiritual leaders for some two million people? (You think you have a lot to do!) The only possible way for them (and us) to meditate day and night was to meditate on the text of Scripture once during the day, and then, as they were doing the other things that were also God's will for them “day and night,” they could recall the truth they had absorbed earlier. The first and simplest test of whether you have adequately meditated on Scripture is whether you



can remember it—not only after you close your Bible—but also later that day (or night).

As a general rule, then, for the daily intake of Scripture, I recommend: “Read big, meditate small.” Read a “big” section of Scripture (a chapter or more), and then meditate “small,” that is, on one verse or phrase from your reading. Reading is necessary to give you context and to help you see the whole landscape of the passage.

**Meditation is necessary** to help you remember, absorb, pray about, and apply something from the passage.

Even if you have only ten minutes for the Word of God, don’t read for ten minutes. Read for five and meditate for five. For it’s far better to read less—if necessary—and remember *something*, than to read more and remember *nothing*.

## CHAPTER 4

# Solutions to Common Problems of Prayer as a Spiritual Discipline

In our focus on the personal spiritual disciplines, we have said the two most important disciplines are the intake of the Word and prayer. The previous chapter stressed the importance of all forms of Bible intake, especially reading and meditation on Scripture. This chapter spotlights prayer.

## A common problem in prayer

In the last chapter, I noted there is an almost universal problem with the intake of the Word and prayer. With biblical intake, people who read the Bible often say that as soon as they close God's Book, they cannot remember anything they've read. I maintained that the heart of the problem is not people's memories, education, or IQ but rather a lack of meditation on something they read. I suggested that people read a "big" section of Scripture (a chapter or more) but then meditate "small," that is, on one verse or phrase from their reading. And even if they have only ten minutes for the Bible, they should read for five and meditate for five.

With prayer, the common problem is this: people tend to **pray the same old things about the same old things.**

This can make the heart dull, and the mind wander. Frankly, praying this way day after day can become boring. And when prayer is boring, people tend to pray less frequently. They—even pastors—feel like spiritual failures and assume *they* are the problem. As with Bible intake, I believe the person usually is not the problem; rather, it is their *method*.

Praying about the same old things is not the problem. It's normal. That's because our lives typically consist of the same things from one day to the next. If you're going to pray daily about your life, and if most things in your life don't change dramatically very often, that means you're going to pray about basically the same things every day. No problem there. The problem is that we usually say the same old things about the same old things. And to try to pray differently every day about the same things takes more time and mental effort than most are willing to give.

As a result, you can pray to the most fascinating Person in the universe about the most important things in your

life and be bored to death. Would you look forward to a conversation with *anyone* (even God!) if you said the same things every time?

## The simple solution

What's the solution? Whatever it is, it must be simple. God's people are all over the world—of all ages, educational levels, IQs, and degrees of Christian advantages (good teaching, books, etc.)—and yet if all are to do the same thing (pray), then it must be fundamentally simple. In other words, every Christian (including you) must be able to have a meaningful, satisfying prayer life.

What, then, is the simple, permanent, biblical solution to this almost universal problem in prayer? Here it is: When you pray, pray the Bible. Turn the words of Scripture into the words of your prayers.

## The method

Let's say you were praying through Psalm 23. It might look like this:

You read, "The Lord is my shepherd," then pray something like, *Lord, I thank You that You are my shepherd. You're a good shepherd. And You've shepherded me all my life. Would You please shepherd my family today? Guide them into Your ways. Lead them not into temptation; deliver them from evil. Please make them Your sheep, too. May they love You as their shepherd as I love You as my shepherd. And would You shepherd me in the decision that's before me? Should I make that move or not? And please shepherd me as I shepherd Your flock.*

Then, when nothing else comes to mind, you go to the next line: "I shall not want." *Thank You, Lord, that I've never really been in want. I haven't missed many meals. But I know You want me to bring my desires to You, so would You provide the finances for these bills, school, and car? Then maybe you think of someone in need—perhaps someone in your church, people in a disaster area, or the persecuted church overseas—and you pray for them.*

Go to the next line when you can't think of anything else to say. Perhaps nothing comes to mind from the next line, so you go to the next one. Maybe you're in a passage where you don't understand a verse. Fine. Skip it and go to the next



verse. Nothing says you have to pray over every verse or finish the psalm. Go through the verses line-by-line, talking with God about whatever the text prompts until you run out of time.

Anyone can do that—from the most mature Christian to the newest believer, from those who know the Bible best to those who know it least. Even a 6-year-old who can read can do that. You don't need any notes or to remember a formula. Just talk to God about what you read in His Word. See how easy that is?

This works whether you've got five minutes or one hour. In either case, you never run out of anything to say; best of all, you never repeat yourself. Pray the Bible, and you'll never again say the same old things about the same old things. You'll pray about routine matters but in brand new ways. And you'll find yourself praying about things you'd never otherwise pray for.

## The Psalms and elsewhere

The Psalms are the **easiest places to learn how to pray** the Bible.

After all, they were inspired by God for the very purpose of reflecting on God through song. The next easiest are the New Testament letters. Once you've tried it (go for about seven minutes the first time), you'll be able to pray through any part of the Bible.

As you pray this way, I believe you'll *experience* prayer for what it *is*: a real conversation with a real Person. For the Bible *is* God speaking, isn't it? Just like a real conversation, God speaks in His Word, then you speak to Him in His "own language," as Joni Eareckson Tada has put it.

Pastor, this will help you not only in your private prayers but also in your prayers with others and in your public prayers. And it's an excellent method to teach your people.

## CHAPTER 5

# The **Blessings** **of Fasting** as a Spiritual Discipline



Another spiritual discipline pastors can practice is fasting.

## Fasting defined

Christian fasting is a believer's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. A person may fast for health purposes, and while this can be a good thing, it's not fasting as described in Scripture (although health benefits can result from Christian fasting). While it can be appropriate to speak of fasting from other things besides food—such as your phone, TV, etc.—technically, the Bible uses the term only in reference to abstinence from food.

In chapter three of my *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress, 2014), I describe nine different types of biblical fasts, such as regular, occasional, congregational, etc. For purposes of this book, I'll emphasize only two. The first is a “normal” fast, which involves abstaining from all food but not water or perhaps other liquids. This is probably the most common type of fast and is usually done privately and only occasionally.

Pastor, if you teach fasting to a congregation, many will be unable to engage in a normal fast. People will have medical reasons—such as migraines, diabetes, pregnancy, etc.—that prevent fasting. You should also be aware of a “partial” fast. This involves a limitation of the diet but not abstention from all food. If a person requires a balanced nutritional intake, he eats only the minimum necessary to prevent problems. Some can eat one simple food, such as plain bread or rice, as needed. Though we do not want to risk harm, those who choose a partial fast should still feel either some desire for more food or more pleasure from what they eat. Like hunger from a normal fast, this dissatisfaction with the food is essential, as we shall see.

## Scripture expects fasting

To those unfamiliar with the subject, the biggest surprise in this book for many is that fasting is a New Testament expectation for Christians. Notice Jesus' words at the beginning of Mt 6:16–17: “And *when* you fast ... But *when* you fast ...” (emphasis added). By giving us instructions on what to do and what not to do when we fast (see the negative command, the positive command, and a promise in vv. 16–18), Jesus assumes that we will fast.

This is even clearer when we notice the context. In words



just above His teaching on fasting, Jesus says, “when you give . . . when you give” (vv. 2-3), and “when you pray . . . when you pray” (vv. 5-7). We often use these passages to teach about giving and prayer but somehow miss the parallelism about fasting.

Since nothing in Scripture indicates that we no longer need to fast, and since we know that Christians in the book of Acts fasted (see 9:9; 13:2; 14:23), we may conclude that Jesus still expects His followers to fast today.

## Fasting for a biblical purpose

The most important concept to know is this: **have a biblical purpose for your fast. Without a clear biblical purpose, fasting becomes, at best, a mere test of endurance and, at worst, a vain attempt at works righteousness.**

We must never attempt to impress God with how much we make ourselves suffer for His sake.

God is impressed only with the **suffering and righteousness of Christ.**

Then why fast? In one sense, we could ask that of all the spiritual disciplines. Like the other disciplines, fasting done biblically can be a means of sustaining (not saving) grace.

Remember that fasting is not a practice developed by pious people long ago. Fasting is God’s idea. There are unique blessings we can receive only through fasting. If the same blessings could be experienced through other means, there would be no place for fasting in the Christian life.

So here’s what fasting looks like *without* a biblical purpose:



your headaches, or your stomach growls, and you think, “I’m hungry! Oh, wait; I’m hungry because I’m fasting today.” If your next action is to look at the time, and your next thought is, “How long until this is over?” then you’re doing it wrong. There’s no biblical purpose in that. Your purpose is merely to endure it. And it’s probably just a miserable, self-centered experience.

With a biblical fast, whenever you realize that you are hungry and remember you are fasting, you remember the biblical purpose for your fast and act on it. For example, if your purpose is to pray for someone’s salvation, every time you get hungry, your hunger prompts you to pray for that person’s salvation.

This is why you *want* to feel hungry during a fast and why those on a partial fast need some sense of desire for more food or for something more pleasurable than bread to eat. Your hunger isn’t just something to endure. It serves your biblical purpose. It is your reminder to pursue what you hunger for right now, even more than food.

## Examples of biblical purposes for fasting

In *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, I summarize 10 purposes for fasting found in Scripture. I can’t mention or describe them all here. Still, they include fasting to seek God’s guidance, to seek deliverance or protection, to express repentance, to express concern for the work of God and to seek His blessing upon it, to minister to the needs of others, to express love and worship to God, and more.

The most common one seems to be—and in one sense relates to them all—to strengthen prayer for something specific. On these occasions, prayer serves as an intensifier of our spiritual desires. As mentioned above, during such a fast, every awareness of hunger is a prompt to pray for that which you want God to do even more than you want food for that day.

So fasting must always have a biblical purpose—a **God-centered purpose**, not a self-centered one.



## The sure reward of biblical fasting

God has often crowned fasting with extraordinary blessings. Biblical, historical, and contemporary testimonies bear witness to God's delight in providing unusual blessings to those who fast. But we should be careful not to develop a mechanical view of fasting, believing that God is obligated to give us what we ask. We cannot manipulate God to do our bidding by fasting any more than we can by any other means.

**As with prayer, we fast in the hope that by His grace, God will bless us with what we desire.**

Whether He does or not, when our fast is rightly motivated, we can be sure God *will* bless our fast. Jesus promised in His teaching on fasting, "He who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt. 7:18). And He will do so in the way His infinite wisdom knows is best.

## CHAPTER 6

# Family Worship as a Spiritual Discipline

I have not addressed the *interpersonal* spiritual disciplines, such as congregational worship, prayer with others, fellowship, serving others, and more. These, too, are at least as important in a believer's pursuit of godliness, a term I consider basically synonymous with Christlikeness, holiness, and sanctification.

In this chapter, I want to write about a discipline that one might consider somewhere in between the personal and interpersonal disciplines: family worship. By definition, this is not a biblical discipline that one engages in privately, nor is it done publicly. It takes place in the home. By including family worship in the list of disciplines, we might broadly categorize them as personal, familial, and interpersonal. And while the practice of family worship involves at least one other person (such as a spouse or child), it usually relies primarily on the discipline of one individual (typically the husband/father) for it to happen. Pastor, in your home, this would be you.

## Family worship in the Bible

While there is no explicit command about family worship in the Bible, scripture implies its practice. Space permits only a few brief examples.

When Abraham was about to sacrifice his son in response to God's command, Isaac asked, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:6-7)." How did Isaac know they didn't have everything necessary for the worship of God? It was because he had seen his father build altars and offer animal sacrifices before. Abraham obviously led his family in the worship of God on many other occasions.

The book of Job (1:1-3) begins with a description of Job's devotion to God, the size of his family, and the abundance of his wealth. Verse 4 tells how Job's seven sons would take turns hosting feasts, events at which they would also invite their three sisters. After each feast, verse 5 explains, "Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job did continually." After each of these family feasts, Job would lead his family in the worship of God. And it may be that he did this often, because it states Job did this "continually."



In Psalm 78, the writer commands fathers to “Tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done” (v. 4; see also vv.5-8). The context for this command appears to be one of worship. But local synagogue worship would not arise for centuries, and congregational worship in those days would have been on a national scale and very infrequent, occurring during one of the annual observances at the tabernacle. Moreover, the language in this psalm is familial, not congregational. So, when would fathers have obeyed this command? The implication seems to be in some type of family worship.

“Husbands, love your wives,” says the Lord in Eph. 5:25–26, “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” This “washing of water with the word” is one of the most beautiful and memorable phrases in the New Testament. But in real life, how does a husband do this?

I would contend that one of the best ways men can bring the pure water of the Word of God into their homes is through the spiritually cleansing and refreshing practice of **family worship**.

Ephesians 6:4 addresses “Fathers” and tells them, “do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Beyond taking your children to church, how do you accomplish this? While it should occur in unplanned and teachable moments throughout the day, it should also happen intentionally. Consistent, father-led family worship is one of the



observable and measurable ways a man can obey this command.

Husbands are the focus again in 1 Pet. 3:7. Note that all husbands are not fathers, and most fathers reach a time when children are no longer in the home. That means family worship is for both childless couples and empty-nesters, as well as those who have children living with them. “Husbands,” writes Peter, “live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.” I did not realize for many years that the prayers spoken of here are not the husband’s prayers, but the mutual prayers husbands and wives pray together. Peter assumes that husbands and wives pray together. That’s part of family worship.

## Family worship in Christian history

In my book on Family Worship, I devote 16 pages to a brief survey of family worship in Christian history. It begins with how believers practiced family worship in the decades immediately after the apostles and continues with examples from well-known believers throughout the centuries up to the present. I wrote this to demonstrate that **family worship is no contemporary fad, but something that Christians have always understood to be a biblical practice.**

I wish I had the space to repeat more of these inspiring testimonies so that you might feel the weight of the importance given to family worship by our Christian forebears. But I will include only three representative examples.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) and the Second London Confession of Faith of the Baptists (1689)—the most influential confessional statements of their various traditions; documents still affirmed by thousands of churches around the world—both declare: “God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself” (emphasis added). The Westminster Directory of Family Worship (1647) prescribes church discipline for men who would not lead their families in the daily worship of God.

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) said, “If we want to bring up a godly family, who shall be a seed to serve God when our heads are under the clods of the valley, let us seek to train





them up in the fear of God by meeting together as a family for worship.” And the incredibly busy Spurgeon practiced what he preached. Regardless of the number of visitors almost always present in his home, his wife Susannah wrote that at 6:00 every evening, everyone present gathered in the pastor’s study to join Spurgeon, his wife, and twin boys for family worship.

In our own day, John Piper has written, “You have to decide how important you think these family moments are. It is possible—for little ones and teenagers and parents. You may have to work at it. But it can be done.”

## Family worship in your home

There are three things the Bible tells us to do in worship that we can do whether we are worshipping publicly (that is, with the church), privately, or with the family. Those things are: **read the Bible, pray, and sing.**

This means family worship can be done with no preparation and in as little as ten minutes—even less if it involves very young children.

Open the Bible where you left off last time and read an appropriate length for those present. Then pray. I’d suggest praying about at least one thing from your Bible reading. This prevents the prayers from sounding like “the same old things about the same old things” each time and teaches the participants (children especially) the essentials of how to pray the Bible.

Then sing. This can feel awkward at first—even for a pastor—particularly if it’s just you and your wife in worship. But it doesn’t have to be long; perhaps just a chorus or one verse of a hymn. Having a songbook can be helpful. Your church might even have some unused hymnals you could employ.

That’s it! If time permits, the family worship gathering can also be a great time to catechize, work on Scripture memory, read a Christian book, or do some general reading.

Beware, however, of setting your expectations too highly. You’ll likely become discouraged—often—because something “significant” so seldom happens. A lack of enthusiasm for and response to family worship is common. Don’t quit. The effects of family worship are cumulative,



and rarely noticeable on a day-to-day basis. Regardless of the lack of visible fruit, your long-term faithfulness will not be in vain.

Even if you rarely see “results,” **God is worthy** of worship in your home by your family.

Pastor, regardless of what anyone else does, may you have the resolve of Joshua 24:14, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” in family worship.

## CHAPTER 7

# Maintaining **Pastoral Resilience** through the Spiritual Disciplines

Recently, I read a report based on a late 2022 study by the Barna Group indicating that “only 52 percent of pastors are ‘very satisfied’ with their jobs; only 50 percent are just as confident of their calling as they were when they began; and only 38 percent are very satisfied with their current church assignment... The numbers show categorical declines as high as 20 percentage points from seven years ago [2015] when Barna last studied pastoral resilience.”

Indeed there are many causes for this decline, not the least of which are the effects upon the church and pastoral ministry caused by the Covid pandemic and the political/social upheaval of recent years.

Amid this turmoil, how can a pastor avoid joining the unusually high number of pastors voluntarily leaving the ministry? Of course, there are important health, nutritional, and exercise habits to consider, but most pastors are at least aware of these, even if they are careless with them. So I will not address those here.

This is a book about pastors and the spiritual disciplines found in Scripture. Thus, I intend to use this final chapter to speak to perseverance in those disciplines to maintain in stressful times. It’s what the Barna article referred to as “pastoral resilience.”

## Spiritual Dryness

I find it hard to believe that many pastors would resign during a time of personal spiritual vibrancy. It seems much more likely that a pastor would leave the ministry during a season of spiritual dryness. This condition is similar to that which Martyn Lloyd-Jones describes in one of his best-known books, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*. Similarly, the Puritans often wrote about what they termed “spiritual desertions,” when believers feel like God (seemingly contrary to His promises) has deserted them and left their souls in a spiritual desert. In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan portrays this struggle in a narrative when he writes of his pilgrim going through “the valley of the shadow of death.”

I think God brings every pastor (and Christian) through such seasons. Knowing this is a normal part of the Christian life may bring comfort. In part, the Lord allows these times to teach us perseverance in the disciplines, to walk by faith, and to encourage us to find Christ sufficiently satisfying,



even when He seems to disappoint us.

Still, how should we remain resilient when we feel spiritually dry? I have only a few paragraphs in which to make suggestions. For more in-depth insight and encouragement, I recommend reading the books and writers mentioned above. To them, I would add a piece by Spurgeon on “The Minister’s Fainting Fits,” which is taken from his great book, *Lectures to My Students*. Even Spurgeon, you may recall, often battled depression, especially from mid-life onward, when his struggle with gout likely contributed a part.

Let me suggest that you drink from three wells of refreshment the Lord provides even when He places you in a spiritual desert. Some of what follows appears in the chapter on “Persevering in the Disciplines” in my book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. May the Lord open your eyes to see these wells as He did for Hagar when He opened her eyes to the well she had not seen when Abraham sent her to the desert (Gen. 21:19).

## The Well of the Holy Spirit

As important as they are, the spiritual disciplines are not the source of our spiritual life and strength. Jesus is. We don’t remain spiritually strong because we faithfully practice the disciplines, but only when we seek Jesus and His strength by faith *through* the rightly motivated practice of the disciplines.

You are a supernaturalist, right? You believe two people live in your body—you and the Holy Spirit of God Himself. In this way, you have become one of the “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). And thus, “God gave us a spirit not of fear

but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7). Ask the Lord to help you experience His indwelling Spirit’s “power and love and self-control.”

Do you still have a flicker of desire to serve the Lord as one of His undershepherds? Take heart: this is evidence of the Spirit’s work in you. “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

Once when describing his labors as a minister, Paul wrote, “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Col. 1:29). Notice that it was Paul who toiled and that his ministry was often “toil.” He is the one who went to bed weary and often discouraged, not God. But how did Paul manage to get up the next day—perhaps after a beating or stoning and other forms of persecution—and keep “struggling” on? It was “with all His [i.e., God’s] energy that He powerfully works within me.”

Paul toiled, but the desire and the power to persevere in ministry was from God. If God has called you to pastor, **He will do the same for you.**

The Holy Spirit who indwells you is the Spirit of Jesus. And Jesus promised: “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Heb. 13:5-6).

Moreover, the Spirit is praying for you: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26-27). What do you think is the percentage of prayers the Spirit prays for you that are answered? It’s probably pretty close to the percentage of prayers of Jesus that are answered, right? And by the way, this assurance is one of the reasons why Paul begins the beautiful promise in the very famous next verse (Rom. 8:28) with “And we know that...”

Just as the Holy Spirit does, Jesus Himself is praying for you. In His Great High Priestly prayer (Jn. 17), Jesus prayed not only for His disciples, but He also said to the Father, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe



in me through their word” (v. 20). Hebrews 7:25 adds, “He always lives to make intercession for them.” In His loving providence, the Father may have put you in the desert for a season, but He has not abandoned you there. The Holy Spirit is with you, and Jesus is praying for you there.

“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

## The well of fellowship

Although this series has been about personal spiritual disciplines, the interpersonal ones are just as important for pastors as for any other Christian, especially when you are spiritually dry. But engagement in many of these disciplines—public worship, prayer with others, serving the people of God, and more—are inherently a part of your ministry responsibilities.

There is one interpersonal discipline, however, even though it is a constituent part of pastoral ministry, that has more of a voluntary side to it. That discipline is fellowship. By that, I do not mean socializing, which is talking about news, weather, sports, work, and family. Though socializing has its place in a Christian’s life, too often, what passes for fellowship is just socializing with other Christians. But real *koinonia* (the Greek word usually translated as “fellowship”) involves talking about God and the things of God. I maintain that we do far less of that than we think, even at church.

Without intentionality, *koinonia* rarely happens. In this way, *koinonia* is similar to evangelism. When you evangelize, you almost always are the one who takes the initiative to turn the conversation to the things of God. The same is almost always true with fellowship as well. To experience *koinonia*, you must also take the responsibility to turn the conversation to spiritual matters. It is helpful to keep a list of *koinonia*-cultivating questions on my phone.

Pastor, you desperately need *koinonia*, not only in ordinary times but especially when you are spiritually dry. There should be mature believers in your church with whom you can find the encouragement of true fellowship. But suppose you have an immature church or are on the verge of quitting. In that case, you probably need to be more intentional about talking about the things of God with

trusted believers (especially fellow ministers) outside your congregation. And your soul needs this *often*, even if only by phone or live video.

Beware of the temptation to turn inward during times of spiritual dryness or ministry desperation. No amount of faithfulness and consistency with the personal spiritual disciplines can supply your need for what God provides through the interpersonal spiritual disciplines, including *koinonia*.

## The well of struggle

You may be thinking: *I can see how the Holy Spirit and fellowship are “wells” from which I can draw refreshment in times of spiritual dryness, but “struggle”?*

Remembering that the Bible says struggle is a *normal* part of much of the Christian life and ministry can encourage you.

The theme verse for this series has been ,  
“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” Just three verses later, Paul writes, “For to this end we toil and strive” (v. 10). There’s that word “toil” again. I think Paul has in view both your personal pursuit of godliness and your ministry of cultivating godliness in others.

That means you can be as faithful as Paul in your Christian life and pastoral ministry, but you will often find that you “toil and strive” in both. **That’s normal.**

One reason for your frequent struggles in following Christ and serving Him is that you always have fierce opposition for doing so—both internally and externally—from the world, the flesh, and the Devil. If you were on their side, there would be far less struggle. We all get weary from warfare sometimes, and the weariness can leave you spiritually dry and feeling deserted. So do not despair; even the best soldiers get battle weary.

Another reason you—and all Christians—struggle is that this is how the Lord separates His true followers from those who merely profess to be. Peter explains how this struggle can be a well of joy: “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—





may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:6-7). Anyone can stay faithful when things are going well, and their ministry seems to enjoy the Lord’s favor. But only those who continue to love Jesus and serve Him faithfully when there is no evident, immediate benefit for doing so are the ones who can enjoy the assurance that their faith is genuine and they do not minister as mere “hirelings” (Jn. 10:12-13).

Dear struggling, discouraged, spiritually dry pastor: persevere in the spiritual disciplines. The resilience you seek will not be found apart from them, for they are the means God has given you to experience and enjoy Him. Keep asking, seeking, and knocking. The Lord has not, nor will He ever, desert you (Mt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5).

When you walk from the sunlight into the shade, the sun is no less near, even though it feels that way. Sometimes we walk in the warmth of God’s presence; at other times, we must walk in the shadows. But He is no less near in the shadows. Walk on, for you may almost be in His sunlight again.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you in turmoil within me?  
**Hope in God**; for I shall again praise him,  
my salvation and my God (Ps. 42:5 and 11).

May the Lord give you the resolve of Puritan Pastor Richard Alleine when he prayed, “I will die fighting. I will die hoping. I will die praying.” Let us die practicing those God-given disciplines by which we experience the presence and power of God.

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*If you want to learn more about the spiritual disciplines described in this book, or still have a number of What about ...? questions, or want a resource to teach family worship your church, see my book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, (NavPress, 2014).*



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