

Desiring the Disciplines

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by David Schrock

The new year is always a good time to recalibrate habits and reconsider spiritual disciplines. Over the next month, we will do both at Occoquan Bible Church.

First, as we begin the new year, we will be starting some new habits with regards to worship services, church communications (in the form of an app), and Bible reading.

Read these blog posts to learn more:

- [A new worship service schedule](#)
- [An OBC app and new online giving system for 2017](#)
- [Bible reading plans for the new year](#)

In our sermon series, we will consider the personal disciplines of Scripture reading and prayer. Then, we will broaden our horizons to see the need for [public spiritual disciplines](#) concerning the sanctity of life and racial reconciliation. At the same time, in our Sunday School hour (now 10:00am) we will begin a series on January 15 on being a disciple and making disciples. Discipleship, like any other spiritual habit, is a discipline. Indeed, both come from the same root idea—disciplining ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Timothy 4:8).

Still, for all the good spiritual disciplines bring, they are powerless without the Holy Spirit, and ineffective without a spiritual desire for the Lord.

Spiritual Discipline and the Spirit

Often, when we come to spiritual disciplines we list them, plan for them, and then labor to perform them. In the best scenario, we realize—sooner rather than later—we can't do them apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. And so we pray and ask God to help us.

Yet, such approach may go wrong from the start. Why? Because we put the law (and its list) in front of the gospel (and its power). In other words, when we devote ourselves to discipline, we "covenant" with a bank of rules we trust to make us better—better people, better Christians, better (you fill in the blank). But of course, the law never brings life and can only be a delight when God has written his law on our heart.

The problem with any law-full approach to discipline, however, it not that it contains laws. *The gospel is not antinomian*—lawless. The [third use of the law](#) is a gift to the growing disciple. The problem is when we call upon the Spirit to assist us *after* our plan is put in place. Now granted, if you setting out to read the Bible, pray, and fast, you have already taken your cues from the Spirit's inspired Word—especially, on that last discipline. But still the root cause of burnout remains. What is that? The problem of desire.

Spiritual Desire is the Key to Spiritual Discipline

In *You Are What You Love*, James K. A. Smith reminds us that we are not “thinking-things” (Descartes), but “loving-things” (Augustine), creatures who follow our passions and desires more than any well-reasoned directive. Smith illustrates the point with his transformation in eating. Leaving behind his “meat and potatoes” diet with no room for vegetables, he now craves Greek Yogurt and salads—so he says.

He recounts the process of transformation and how his mental beliefs outran his bodily appetites. (Rosaria Butterfield speaks of the same reality in [her interview with Mark Dever](#)). Reading Wendell Berry in a Costco food court—the height of hypocrisy, one might say—Smith explains how our spiritual appetites also lag behind our acquired knowledge. The point he makes about bodily appetites is the point I want to make about spiritual ones.

If our minds are convinced that we need to read the Bible, pray, go church, and stop watching so much TV, but our hearts (and bodies) still long to sleep in, browse the Internet, and go shopping, then the problem is less our thinking and more our desiring. Come up with the best plan, tether it to a dozen apps and reminders, and it will still fail. The heart will pull us after its own desire.

As we know too well, there’s a gap between what we know and what we do. “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15). Moreover, the habits of life given to us by the culture, “secular liturgies” as Smith calls them, train us to fill ourselves on other appetizers.

In such cases, the best laid plan for spiritual discipleship fails because it is not matched by spiritual hunger. But to make matters even worse, such a desire is cultivated by following a routine of spiritual disciplines. What will break the cycle of spiritual disinterest? What is the source of spiritual hunger that might impel our disciplines and result in true communion with God?

The Birth of a New Desire

The unsurprising but truthful answer is God. Only God can create, sustain, and increase our spiritual appetites. Only God can order our days such that we get the daily bread we need and the space and time and desire to commune with him. Indeed, just as God the Father sought us in salvation, when we lacked desire for him (Romans 10:20); so we depend on God the Spirit to convict, agitate, implant, empower, and enlarge a new appetite in us.

This is our hope. It comes from God and is born in the new birth. In conversion, the seed of the Word produces life, but it also produces a new spiritual appetite. This is what Ezekiel 36 means when it says,

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (vv. 26–27)

What a glorious gift, the new birth is. Not only does God justify us when he gives us faith; he also empowers us to begin a life of sanctification. The spiritual disciplines are the “free weights,” if you will, that enable the child of God to grow in spiritual strength. And while at the start we may not feel any pleasure in a spiritual regimen, the new life presses us forward.

In *You Are What You Love*, Smith rightly addresses the power of habit, but he overlooks the new birth. He explains how bodily habits and spiritual disciplines transform us, but he forgets (I trust, he assumes) the power that comes from the spiritual life within. This desire for God given in the new birth is the source of strength for every spiritual discipline. And then, and only then, in cooperation with the Spirit, do we have power to say 'no' to ungodliness and walk in new ways.

Perseverance, therefore, is not (ultimately) attributable to the choices of an individual. It, like everything else, is a gift of grace. Reading the Bible, understanding the Bible, and desiring the Bible are all fruit of the Spirit. And thus, the child of God who wants God but doesn't want him enough, is led to cry out like the man in Mark 9:24: "I desire, help me desire."

To be clear, this emphasis on the affections does not undermine truth. It is a humanity-affirming, appetite-embracing truth in itself. We are not saved by *knowing* truth but by *loving* truth and thereby abiding in it (see John 8:32; 2 Thessalonians 2:10). Such desire for God is what ultimately overcomes the difficulties associated with the spiritual disciplines.

Discipline Begins with Desire

As you make plans for the new year, let me encourage you to take seriously Paul's words in 1 Timothy 4:7, "Discipline yourself for godliness" (NASB). Only, in all your well-laid plans, do not forget self-discipline is both given by the Spirit (Galatians 5:23) and sustained by desire. Therefore, the first spiritual discipline is not just establishing a list of improved habits. It is the prayerful cry for God to enflame your desires for him.

Indeed, the whole point of Bible reading, journaling, service, etc. is for our affections for the Lord—and the affections of others in the Lord—to increase. Yes, this comes through regular exercise of the spiritual disciplines, but the underlying endurance comes from a hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Therefore, as we enter into 2017, let us do so praying for God to give us more of himself—first by awakening a desire within us and then by cultivating habits of Scripture and prayer centered around him.

Soli Deo Gloria,

David Schrock