

Christ – Master of Spiritual Discipline

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” (Mark 1:35)

1. The definition of spiritual discipline

The spiritual discipline is according to Richard Foster, "a **means of receiving** God's grace [They] allow us to **place ourselves** before God so he can transform us". Yes, we do need the transformation. Those ‘means of receiving God’s grace’ according to Donald Whitney, are : worship, prayer, evangelism; fasting, learning, journaling; scripture reading, scripture meditation, scripture application; serving, stewardship, silence & solitude.

Spiritual disciplines are not just ‘certain things to do or to practice, to exercise, or even to enjoy’, but are the means in which we can be exposed to God’s grace. Without God’s grace, the disciplines themselves can only promote self-esteem and pride. In spiritual disciplines, there are always two factors at work : human factor and divine factor, the Divine factor always leads the Human factor.

2. The foundation of spiritual discipline

In today’s familiar scripture taken from John 15, Jesus said ‘I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing’. Here Christ used a vine/branches parable to express the unique indwelling relationship between a believer and Himself! The indwelling of Christ into believers’ heart is the Divine Factor for all Christians to grow spiritually. Without the indwelling Christ, no one can grow or bear fruit. The supernatural fruit that Christ gives are love, joy and peace.

Someone says : I do not feel Christ is dwelling with me! Experiencing the indwelling Christ is not by feeling nor by reasoning nor by sighting, but by faith - according to what the Bible. Jesus assured His indwelling by giving us three supernatural gifts to all believers : love, joy, peace and Word. These promises are all from John 15 and 16. He said ‘As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain **in my love** (15:9)’; ‘I have told you this so that **my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete** (15:11)’; Christ also said ‘I have told you these things, so that **in me you may have peace (16:33)**’; lastly ‘If you remain in me and my words remain in you (15:7)’. In those words, Christ expressed an indwelling relationship with His disciples through these gifts ‘love, joy, peace and Word’. Those gifts are the Divine Factor for us to grow spiritually.

Andrew Murray in his book ‘The Master's Indwelling’ layout five steps to experience the indwelling Christ. Those are not magic formula but faith at work :

1. ‘I believe there is rest in a life of faith’.
2. "I have not had it yet."
3. "Thank God, that life is for me.
4. "I can never, by any effort of mine, grasp it; it is God must bestow it on me."
5. "I do now give up myself to the holy and everlasting God, for Him to lead me into this perfect rest."

‘Thomas Kelly’ : ‘There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, meeting the demands of external affairs. But deep within behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship, and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.’ ‘For though we begin the practice of secret prayer with a strong sense that we are the initiators and that by our wills we are establishing our habits... for God Himself works in our souls in their deepest depths, taking increasing control as we are progressively wiling to be prepared for His wonder’.

In spiritual discipline, the indwelling Christ produced a Master-Student relationship, that His Mastery of Love, Joy, Peace, and Word inside of us supersedes our spiritual discipline activities : **worship, prayer, evangelism, fasting, learning, journaling; scripture reading, scripture meditation, scripture application; serving, stewardship, silence & solitude.**

Human Factor/Spiritual discipline – The Student	Divine Factor/Indwelling Christ – The Master of Spiritual Discipline
Worship	Love
Prayer	Joy
Evangelism	Peace
Scriptural reading	Word

3. The application of spiritual discipline : Silence & Solitude

In our 2nd passage today, we learn that Christ had devoted A particular prayer life unto the Father. Mark told us that ‘Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed’. Jesus guarded His heart so well that He would let it be filled with the Father’s Love, joy, and peace early in the morning. What is special about this ‘solitary place’ ?

Someone has said that ‘We have **an infinite void** in our hearts that we attempt to fill with noise, people, busy-ness, possessions, and other **finite** things.’ Our hearts are bombarded by those **finite** things of the world from the moment we awake in the morning. Since those things are finite, we will never be satisfied with them, so soon we are looking for something else. ‘Solitary place’ allows us to get those **finite** things off our minds, let our infinite void be filled with the infinite God! This is where Thomas Kelly called the deeper level prayer; this is where the Psalmist called ‘Deep calls to deep’; this is where Christ dwells there with us. Infinite Christ has

come to our hearts to fulfill your infinite void and to fulfill my infinite void. 'Silence and Solitude' allows this to happen. Why ?

First, silence allows us to get away from the manipulation or influence of the people around because we all have the tendency to influence others with many words. Then solitude allows us to concentrate on God alone because God alone dwells in Secret place (Isaiah 45:15 : Truly you are a God who hides himself O God and Savior of Israel). Silence and solitude combined are the starting point for all other spiritual disciplines.

How does a person go about putting the 'silence & solitude' into practice? There are few suggestions.

1. Silence & Solitude require Space & Time

a) Place

Public : Find a quiet place in a library, a room in your home, a room in a church; somewhere where you will not be interrupted.

Private : Consider making a spare room in your house into a sanctuary.

b) Time : fixed time devotion

2. Silence & Solitude Do Not require Space & Time

Develop a habit of anytime & anywhere in our daily life : waiting; commuting; driving (80 minutes per day in Toronto, 2010)

3. What to practice (engaging the mind and spirit)

a) Consider the attribute of God : love, joy, peace

b) Consider the work of God : creation; provision, redemption

c) Consider the grace of God : how Christ come into our life to dwell with us

d) Waiting/listening in active stillness