

Session 8 Putting it All Together: Developing a spiritual growth plan

In this last session the first thing we want to do, Hamish and I, is to answer some of the questions that have come up as a result of the teaching we've done about the disciplines. Perhaps you who are taking this course in the Lead 360 group have raised some similar questions.

The second thing we'll do is to help you put together a plan for spiritual growth that is helpful to you.

The third and last thing we'll do is to demonstrate how one disciple can help another disciple by simply being a spiritual friend.

1. But before we do any of this, Hamish and I are going to have a dialogue about the disciplines and some of the elements that might still need some clarification.

Georges: So Hamish, what are some of the main objections to the disciplines that you have heard people express?

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Hamish: How about you Georges?

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Hamish and Georges, let a, b, c, below guide the answers we give. If follow up questions are needed, jump right in. If other objections come to mind then mention them.

- a. There are so many of the disciplines. How do we do them all?
- b. Some of them are awkward to me. They just don't fit my personality. Should I do them?
- c. What if a discipline doesn't help me grow spiritually? What do I do then? How long should I keep at it?
- d. These disciplines sound so liturgical! So monastic. I'm not sure they are necessary for evangelicals.
- e. What are the most vital disciplines that I can't skip?

Georges: Hamish, what have you found that has helped you the most keep on track when it comes to practicing these disciplines?

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Hamish: Georges, are there "tricks" that you use to help you keep a healthy focus on the disciplines?

- a. The first thing you have to realize is that it's not about doing the disciplines. Not duty, not obligations, not for show. These disciplines are only a means to an end. They are not an end to themselves.

- b. The second thing you have to realize is that it is about the disciplines. It is about training and that without a plan to train not much change is going to happen in my life.
- c. You must nail down your primary calling in life. Everyone who follows Christ has the same primary calling: To become conformed to the image of Christ. Everyone has also a secondary calling. And that is what do we do with our lives.
- d. Fourth, you must make training for a better character your top priority in life. So much in life depends on it.
- e. Don't do this alone. Christianity is community based faith experience. We are meant to live interdependent lives, not independent ones. There is no shame in seeking the help of another person to grow in Christ.
- f. Determine to make Jesus your teacher. That means... Read Gospels constantly. Record your discoveries about Jesus. I read the Gospel of Matthew several times in a row a little while ago to discover what Jesus was most passionate about. You know what, Jesus was not passionate about some of the things I was passionate about at the time. It became a corrective for me. We must do this constantly.

Georges: Hamish, what would you say are some things that have helped you keep on track in your goal of becoming like Christ?

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Hamish: What would you say have been yours, Georges?

a. I always review the change process and make sure about how change happens in my life. I have become 100% clear about the change process. To change I know I need to have a clear picture what I'm going to become. The more I look at Jesus the more I'm convinced that he bids me come follow him and be formed by him as my teacher. This is the vision I keep in front of me. I am also convinced that I can't be haphazard about changing. If I don't make plans or have intentions about changing, change will not happen to me. Or little change will happen. To change I must intend to see my way through to the vision. I must clear a path in my life that will allow me to accomplish the goal before me. I make solid commitments with built-in accountability factors. I tell my spiritual friends what I'm doing and ask them to check up on me. This is true intention. It's not mere desire or wish. It has teeth. And the last thing in the change process that I know has worked for me is the practice of the habits that have helped me put on the mind of Christ to a much greater extent than what I thought possible. I am learning that it is possible to do the right thing automatically without having to agonize over what I might lose by it. The disciplines have been the means of my transformation. They really work.

b. I picked up a magazine for airplane reading at the Atlanta airport as I was coming back from a meeting about 14 years ago. The magazine appealed to me because it bore my name: Georges. It is no longer running. In it I found an interview of then president Clinton that the editor of the magazine did. That was just before his improprieties were made public. One of the questions that the editor asked the president was: What are you presently reading that is making a difference in your life? One of the books he mentioned was the Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard. I said to myself with some vanity I think, if this is good enough for the president of the USA it's good enough for me. So I read it and lead a small group in studying it. One of the most important truths I learned from this book is the valuable lesson that our bodies are tremendously important in our spirituality. The role of the body in our spiritual transformation is undeniable. I came to realize that we are embodied beings. We don't exist outside our bodies. As we train our bodies to control our human appetites, so goes the rest of our life. So the disciplines of the inner life have taken an importance for me they never had before. For example, in Bible study I am training my mind and my brain to think God thoughts. In fasting I am training my body to respond to sacred moments and to find my strength in God alone. In witnessing I am training my heart to be in tune with the kingdom of God. In service I am training my self to think of others before I think of my own comfort, or myself, and so on.

Georges: Hamish, what are some disciplines that you have found to fit your personality more than others? And why do you think that is?

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Hamish: How about you, Georges?

Silence and solitude, Bible Study, Prayer, Submission, Sabbath, Service, and Witness.

Some of these fit certain personalities and some fit others.

- a. For me, a person who lives much of the time in his own mind, the disciplines of silence and solitude appeal to me a lot. I am bent that way. Give me a glass of water, and a piece of bread, and a few books, and lock me in the room, and come back and check on me every few months and I should be just fine.
- b. But if you are the gregarious, outgoing type of personality, and get much of your energy from serving and being with people, you could struggle with silence and solitude. If you are the quiet type, who likes his own company more than the company of others often, then you might struggle with witness and service.
- c. But struggle is good. Struggle stretches us beyond our comfort zones. We might even get to the point that our personality might change a little. Just

because we are bent in a certain direction doesn't mean we should find the balance we need in the Christian life. Just because we struggle with a discipline may mean that we should train harder to master our reluctance. There are some things we don't discover about ourselves in the company of others just like there are things we don't discover about others in too much solitude. I planted an apple tree in my backyard that is growing slant. So what I drove a stake in the ground next to the tree, attached a rope to the tree and am straightening it a little at a time. You know what, the tree is become straight and balanced. It is this way with our personalities. We can change to find the balance we need.

- d. I admit that there are some disciplines that are best for each type of personality? But frankly speaking all disciplines are good for any type of personality. The key to the disciplines is not to decide on our own. The Holy Spirit is the agent of change in our lives. He initiates the call to the disciplined life and he calls us to enter certain disciplines because he knows what we need better than we do.

2. Now it's time to answer some of the questions that the group we have been teaching have come up with.

Hamish: Georges, would you take a stab at answering question 1.

Question 1...

Georges: Hamish...

Question 2...

Hamish: Georges...

Question 3...

Georges: Hamish...

Question 4...

Hamish: Georges...

Question 5...

Georges: Hamish...

3. Now let's deal with some basic elements in putting our life plan together. You want your plan to reflect three main areas of your life that are held together biblically.

First we must find an organizing principle by which we put our spiritual growth plan together. Perhaps there is no better way to do this plan than to go with what Jesus thought were the greatest commandments. He was asked on more than one occasion what commandments to obey most. His answer never varied. Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord in One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, with all your soul, and all your strength. Your entire self must be God loving. And the second commandment is like the first: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Scriptures. Matthew 22:37-40.

First, Loving God

Here fits the disciplines of silence and awareness of God and his creation, solitude, sacred reading, praying the Lord's Prayer, and praying with our bodies, and Bible study.

Second, Loving or caring for ourselves

Here fits the disciplines of silence, keeping the Sabbath, and submission, and Bible study.

Third, loving others

Here fits the disciplines of prayer walking, service, sharing our faith or witnessing, and Bible study.

The truth is many of the disciplines fit under all three headings.

So let's step the process of writing a plan for spiritual growth.

Step 1 of writing your plan:

In prayer, pick from this list that you feel drawn to. Perhaps you can choose one from each list, or one from one list and two from another. Let the Holy Spirit and your need be your guides. Don't just pick the easy ones for you. Pick the ones you think you most need and will be helpful at this stage in your walk with Christ.

Step 2 of writing your plan:

Add a practice or two that we haven't covered or that you may be familiar with or drawn to. Remember that a discipline is any activity we do that helps us put on the mind of Christ and is means of transformation.

For example, you may pick sleeping, or play, or exercise, or reading the Gospels or the Psalms, or memorizing some portion of Scripture like the Sermon on the Mount, or Colossians 3, or some of the Psalms, or shorter passage.

Step 3 of writing your plan:

Determine the timing and frequency. How often and how long will you practice these activities? Let's say you chose Bible study as one of the activities you will do. Will you do this once a week? Twice a week? Or once a month? Then decide how long you'll do it? Fifteen minutes, an hour, or two?

Step 4 of writing you plan:

Aim for balance and moderation. Have you chosen from all areas? And is what you decided on the frequency and timing attainable? In my earlier days, armed with more zeal than common sense, I would set goals that were too high and most unbalanced. 3 hours a day of solitude is not a good goal. Studying the Bible for two hours each day when you have a family of 4 or 6 is being foolish. Determining that you would eat supper every day in silence when you have small children in the house is, well, stupid.

Step 5 of your plan:

Let others give you some input. Especially let them look at whether you haven't set your goals too high and too unbalanced.

Step 6 of your plan

Live it out. Do it. A plan is useless until it is used.

Schedule times on your calendar for each activity you would do. Block the time and guard it.

Keep the plan visible. Carry it in your wallet or post it on the fridge, or a place where it can be a constant reminder.

Then, find a few people who will hold you accountable after you share your plan with them.

A Sample Plan:

- Keep the Sabbath each 1st Sunday of the month. Or if you work on Sundays chose another day of the week.
- Pray with your body one day every three months on the first day of the month. That's 4 times a year. Make sure your fasting is to help you pay attention to God and is in response to a sacred moment in your life or others' and not a way to bargain with God for some desired results.
- Read a Psalm a day for a whole week as you do sacred reading.

- Study the Bible, once every two weeks for one hour.
- At least once a month intentionally build a relationship for the purpose of discovering a person of peace.
- Weekly serve someone for the sake of it. Plan it ahead. Shovel the snow, give a ride, speak encouragement.
- Eat one meal a week in silence. Preferably a time when you eat alone.
- Pray daily for you family.
- Pray the Lord's prayer daily morning, noon, and night. Take time before you pray to be silent and ready to hear from God about repentance and trust.

4. Spiritual Friendship exercise: Georges coaches Hamish about the Sabbath.

The most common way God speaks to us is through others.

Free flowing...

Pray first for guidance

Ask what help is needed

Don't tell what to do first. Try to understand what the struggle is. Then offer help.

Your main task is to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit

5. A way to assess your life at this time that may help you get started in your spiritual growth plan.

What no one else can do for you is look into your soul with the exception of God, of course. And that's where a spiritual growth plan has to start.

Psalm 139:23-24

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting."

So a bit of an assessment of where you are is helpful as you do planning for spiritual growth. Carolyn and I shop at a store that has a machine that measures blood pressure. As often as we go, we check our blood pressure. This gives us a measurement of how we're doing health wise. The key to this is to do this mini check up regularly to get a consistent picture of progress or regress.

So what do we assess? We assess our longing or desire for God and our motivation for the spiritual journey. The spiritual disciplines we have been teaching work when we do them freely and out of a desire for the goal they are intended to help us reach: Christ likeness. What you really want to assess is your desire for God, not outward appearance. And doing assessment is no guarantee of fixing anything in your life. It's meant only to expose what's there. If we pay attention to the desires of our hearts or lack of them the Holy Spirit has an opening to nudge more and more toward loving God and loving others as ourselves. Adele Calhoun believes that "the goal of the Christian life is not so much a set of outward behaviors as it is an orientation of the soul toward God and his kingdom" as we train to be in union with Christ.

So you want to assess your spiritual health plan and set some goals for your growth on a regular basis.

There are many elaborate plans to examine where you are in your spiritual journey. I often use this simple set of questions and I recommend them for people like you as they start to follow Christ in earnest. Later, when you are further along the journey of following Christ there will be other ways to assess where you are in your walk with God.

The basic question to consider is this: Who are you? Who am I?

How do you see yourself? How do you come up with an answer to this question? I find it helpful to state the answer negatively before I answer it positively.

So first:

I am not what you own, or have. We are bombarded on a daily basis to buy, own, possess. Sometimes this message is subtle and couched with all kinds of hidden

motives from the sellers of status, the advertisement industry. If you want to be somebody, you have to buy this product, use this pill, or go on this vacation. Sometimes the message is blatant: Buy American or Canadian out of a sense of loyalty and pride in your country. I remember right after 911 the president of the USA urging the American people to buy more goods so that the American economy doesn't suffer. Or you go to a store and every aisle is decked with goodies for you to taste and a pile of what they want you to buy stacked neatly next to the tasting diva. Have you noticed by the way how it's always women not men? What's up with that?

We must realize that the messages coming at us are designed to make us more and more conformed to the image of the world or the companies selling us what we should possess and telling us that we are successful human beings to the extent that we own this or that. Latest gadget junkies have to have the next best thing. People will line up in front of stores and sleep on the streets in a couple of days all over the USA to take advantage of the yearly sales. Some of it out of need, I'm sure. Much of it is simply because many are convinced that we are what we own.

We must assess this area of our lives. Catering to our desire for material possessions, or intellectual possessions, or experiences, tends to rob us of much precious time, effort, joy, attention, and focus that we could be giving to developing the mind of Christ and investing in eternity. Here the Lord's Prayer is a corrective for us: Give us this day our daily bread. And that is enough for us. Here an attitude of living sacrificially as Romans 12:1-2 exhorts us is helpful.

The point I make is not so we take pride in our poverty or not to take pride in our investment portfolios. The point I make is simply to assess whether we measure who we are by what we own. If we do we would be like the fool who built barns to house all his stuff to the neglect of his soul.

So we regularly ask ourselves a couple of questions:

Is the desire to possess cluttering my heart and cooling my desire for God?

What can I be rid of that might be helpful in providing me with the time and space I need in my life with God? As you hear the voice of God on this, follow through and let your accountability partner know.

Second:

I am not what I achieve. Society rewards high achievement from degrees to high steps on the ladders of success and achievement. No one is going to recognize you for not striving to be at the top of your profession, your game, and your sport, or what have you. Who won the Grey cup last year? Who came in second? Who came in third and fourth? They are forgotten in the annals of history. We recognize high achievement because it appeals to us. It caters to our striving.

Even in religious work we measure success by high achievement. I suppose in one sense this is good. In another sense, it's a pattern of measurement that is based on competition that has no business among the people of God. We are in competition against our sinful selves and that's it.

The person that achieved the most important thing in life, the salvation of our souls, got killed for it. The irony is it was planned that way.

I am not what I achieve. I am not the number of times I have read my Bible in my lifetime. I am not the number of spiritual disciplines I practiced last week. I am not the number of people I "won for the Lord" in my lifetime. I am not the degrees I have, the position I occupy, or the status I have in the world's perspective. Our God is not shallow, he doesn't look at the outward appearances but on the heart.

Now should we strive to do our best? We should. Should we be at the top of our game in everything we do as if we were doing it unto the Lord? We should. But what we shouldn't do is to measure ourselves by our achievements. They have a way of deceiving us into thinking that our identity is in our works and striving. They have a way of tugging at the strings of our heart (which is deceptive above all things, who can understand it) and making us vulnerable to pride, greed, and envy.

A couple of helpful questions to ask ourselves regularly here are:

What of my high achievements is driven by a deep desire to please God, use my gifts for him, and live up to my potential? What is just striving and vain?

Are my achievements driving me closer to my goal of being Christ-like in my character or farther from my goal?

Third:

I am not what other people say I am.

People say the "darnest" things to us. They evaluate us on the basis of appearance, on the basis of our possessions, or achievements.

The problem is that we love flattery. We love to be praised, recognized, and fussed over. We all sport false humility. Some of what people say about us may be true. Much of it will be only half-truth. We're all "hypocrites" to some extent. We wear masks that veil our shame, fears, anxiety, and guilt. We wear these with finesse. We master the art of camouflage so that no one can recognize the turbulence that is brewing beneath the surface. We hide behind our fig leaves of self-confidence, influence, authority, and skills. The truth is we are struggling with integrity on many levels. Integrity is our visible life mirroring our invisible life.

A couple of helpful questions to ask ourselves regularly here are:

What masks do I wear (am I wearing) that people see and evaluate me by that I hide behind?

Am I in my visible life what I am in invisible life?

Four:

People cannot see into our souls. God can. And with his help we can too.

So we must ask God's help. We must allow God to tell us who we are. And we must come to terms with what we hear.

God has already determined how he sees us. He doesn't look at us in our present moment. He sees us with the completeness of our lives in Christ Jesus. "Beloved, we are God's children now and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." God sees all of our lives, what he's making us, what he's bringing into our lives, and he has already made his assessment: You are my beloved son and daughter in whom I am well pleased. He sees us in Christ Jesus his Son. In Christ is the way Paul says how God thinks about us.

A prayer:

Lord, help me to see that what I am has nothing to do with what I own, what I achieve, or what other people say I am. I am blind to these measurements in my life. I am pulled in many directions. My flesh wants to believe what others say I am or that I am what I have and what I accomplish. I am so drawn to create a false self. Please don't put me through trials, but deliver me from everything bad that feeds my false self.

I trust you when you say that I am your child, beloved by you, and the apple of your eye. Keep me from prostituting myself to the desires of my false self for Christ's sake, Amen.