Spiritual Practices

Ways to Grow Closer to God

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Introduction

The first question I feel important to answer is "Why should I want a more intimate relationship with God?" The best way to answer that is with examples from my own experience.

For many of my early adult years life was something of a struggle. No matter how hard I tried it always seemed like something was missing. I suspect that is true for many others as well. For some people the problem may seem to be money. They might be thinking, "If only I made a little more money I could feel more comfortable financially." For others it may be prestige. "If I could move a little higher up in this organization people would respect me more." The only trouble with trying to chase the things of this world is that they always disappoint us in the end. Someone once asked a multimillionaire who was still working hard for more money, how much more money he needed in order to relax and enjoy what he had. He responded, "Just a few million more."

I discovered a much more satisfying way to live. The truth of this statement was really brought home for me when I was reading Deuteronomy 28: 1-14.

> "1 If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. 2 All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God:
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> 3 You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.
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> 4 The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.
>
> 5 Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.

[6] You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

[7] The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.

[8] The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you.

[9] The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in obedience to him. [10] Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you. [11] The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity—in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground—in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you.

[12] The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. [13] The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. [14] Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today, to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them. "

As I was reading that passage it occurred to me that in a lot of ways that passage was describing my life. Even though I am not the richest man in the world, I have everything I need. I am experiencing a profound contentment with the life I have been given. My strongest desire now is to share what I have found with others.

In my first 15 years after leaving home, I thought I had all the answers to life. I had been raised in a Christian home, but I was living for my own pleasure and following my own rules. I had the freedom to choose to pursue anything I wanted and even thought occasionally I had achieved what I was pursuing. As I look back on those years I realize now that the satisfaction in those achievements was temporary and short-lived. I felt that real lasting satisfaction was always on the horizon but never quite where I was at the time.

My life was a lot like my financial situation at the time. We were always waiting for the next paycheck to get something that we needed. When that paycheck arrived we would get that thing we were waiting for but then there would be something else we needed that we would have to wait for the next paycheck to get. Real financial stability always seemed to be the next paycheck or next promotion away. But somehow that sense of financial stability never came.

The turning point came when I was a little more than 30 years old. A few years before my father retired from being a pastor, my parents were given a tract of land on which they could build their retirement home. For the few years between their receiving the gift and their actual retirement, I had often thought that I would like to go help build that house. When the time finally came I was able to take 30 days of leave from the Air Force and spend that time living with my parents while helping to build their new home.

While I was there, my mother told a few stories about how difficult it was getting that project started. She had trouble with almost every step; finding plans for a home they could afford, getting financing, finding a contractor, etc. It seemed like in every step, when she found herself up against a wall, she would turn the problem over to God and in a little while another idea or suggestion would come up and that would work.

At the end of those 30 days, while I was driving back to Mississippi where I was stationed at the time, I came to realize that I was missing that guiding force in my life and wanted the assurance that it would be available to me too. It was at that point that I became serious about my relationship with the Lord. I immediately recognized that I would need to begin attending church on a regular basis if I was going to maintain any kind of close relationship with the Lord. Every so often after that I would discover or be invited to start another regular spiritual practice that would also help to build that sense of intimacy.

As I look back over my life now, I can see that the reason I missed out on so many blessings when I was trying to live for myself was because I had positioned myself too far away from God to receive the blessings He was offering. In a way it is a little like when kids are invited to play in a lawn sprinkler on a hot day. Some don't even want to play in it. Others only get close enough to get the feet or maybe their legs wet. Others get right in the middle of it and dance around getting soaked all over. In the same way we can decide how close a relationship we want with the Lord. I have found that the greatest blessings can only come from the closest relationship with Him. The best way I have found to build that kind of relationship with the Lord is through regularly participating in spiritual practices.

General Principles

A good starting point is for me to define what I mean by "Spiritual Practices". One of the best metaphors to help define that is the farmer or gardener. Their primary task is to make sure conditions are right to grow the plants they want. Some of the things they might do include tilling the soil to kill any weeds and loosen up the soil so the plant's roots can easily penetrate. They

might add fertilizer to make sure the plants will be able to easily find all the nutrients they need. They might closely watch the moisture content of the soil and water it if it gets too dry. They might need to do things to protect the plants from insects or plant diseases and, of course, weed control is a constant concern. The farmer or gardener can do a lot to make sure the plants have the best conditions possible for their growth but only God can cause the growth.

Jesus used a similar metaphor in the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4: 3-8 and 13-20.

> "[3] Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. [4] As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. [5] Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. [6] But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. [7] Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. [8] Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.
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> [13] Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? [14] The farmer sows the word. [15] Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. [16] Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. [17] But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. [18] Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; [19] but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. [20] Others, like seed sown on

good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

In His parable, Jesus is telling us that our lives are the soil in which spiritual growth takes place. Spiritual Practices are the things we can do to make sure the soil of our lives has the best conditions possible for that spiritual growth to take place. Spiritual practices can be anything that we do on a regular basis that remind us of our relationship with the Lord, help us better understand what is taught in the scriptures, assist us in practicing Christian principles in our life, or strengthen our communion with the Lord.

The list I have provided here is not "all inclusive". I put in all the ones I could think of but you may know of or be able to discover other things that will be helpful for you. Depending on what God is calling you to do, spending too much time on Spiritual Practices may be possible. Unless God is calling you to a monastic life, you will need to create an appropriate balance between your relationship with the Lord, your family, and the other people in your life. Each of these relationships requires that we spend some time on them. Most of us lead such hectic, over scheduled lives that any changes to our schedule will need to be carefully considered since we may have to give up something we are already doing in order to fit in something new. Ultimately, you get to decide the order of importance you want to apply to each of your relationships.

At first I thought it would be easy to arrange this list in order of importance. The first three were very easy to identify. Total surrender of our will to His has to be the starting point. We must step down from the throne of our lives and invite the Lord to take His rightful place or none of the rest of this will do any good. Prayer is next because it is the engine that drives the process of discerning which spiritual practices the Lord is leading you into. Bible Reading/Study is third because that is our reference book on the spiritual life. You cannot learn how to live a spirit-centered life unless you are intimately familiar with what the scriptures say. As I thought about the rest of the list, I realized the most important

spiritual practice for any person is the one the Lord is calling them to get involved with. Each of us is different and the Lord deals with us in light of our uniqueness. As a result, the order in which the rest of these spiritual practices appear is merely the order in which I thought of them.

I recommend considering this list prayerfully. Ask the Lord to guide you as you read through it. If you find something in the list that interests you, consider the time required for it and how making the time for it would impact your schedule. Do you need to give something up or can you just re-arrange your schedule a little to fit it in. Don't expect immediate results when you first start a new spiritual practice. Remember, we are trying to enhance the conditions necessary for spiritual growth to take place. Spiritual growth is a process that continues throughout our lifetime.

I also recommend periodically reviewing all of your spiritual practices. After a while it may be time to add a new one or drop one that doesn't seem to be helpful. You may even need to drop an old one in order to find the time to try a new one. In all cases, be sure to consider the change carefully and prayerfully. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in your decision making.

Surrender

> Acts 2:38 "Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.""

It is through the act of repentance and baptism that we are initiated into the family of God. By that act we are asking God to help us make Him Lord of our lives and to turn away from those things that make us fall short of God's desire for our lives. In effect we are surrendering our will to His.

Romans 12:1 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”

The biggest problem with a living sacrifice is that it so often crawls off the altar. Because of God’s mercy we are always allowed to get back on. The best advice on this point is similar to the advice on how to have the most impact on a corrupt democratic political system, “Vote early and vote often.” In the same way we should surrender to the Lord early and often. In my experience repentance and surrendering my will to His is not a one-time act but an on-going process. Every time I do it again it reinforces my desire to be fully and authentically His.

Prayer

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 “[16] Rejoice always, [17] pray continually, [18] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

When considering the admonition above, it is easy start to focus on verse 17, “pray continually”. Most of us will realize right away, if we take that too literally we won’t be able to accomplish anything but the most routine, repetitive tasks. Maybe the problem there is that when we think of prayer we are often thinking of a certain posture, and a certain thought or word pattern with a definite beginning and end.

There are all kinds of prayers that fit that model. Some of them are offered at specific times of the day like bed time, or meal time. Others may be offered during a worship service or during a time of crisis or celebration. Prayers like this are helpful and it may be a good idea to look at our life over the past day, week, or month

to see how often we pray like that. We may want to be more intentional about these kinds of prayers, but I don't think that is exactly what St Paul had in mind when he wrote those verses.

Imagine what it would be like if you had a friend who enjoyed being with you; was really interested in what you were thinking, feeling, and doing; and who was always willing to help you with whatever happened to be your task at the moment. Don't you think your conversation would be almost continuous when your friend was present? The Lord wants to be that kind of friend and He is always present. Perhaps our task is to train ourselves to be more aware of His presence and just direct more of our thoughts to Him. This kind of prayer does not take any more time out of our schedule. We can direct our thoughts toward the Lord without stopping what we are doing.

One thing that I have found very helpful for improving my prayer life is prayer itself. I started by regularly asking the Lord to help me be more intentional about prayer. After a while I found that He was prompting me to pray more often. I still have hope that maybe someday I will be praying continually.

Verses 16 and 18, about giving thanks in all circumstances, offer us some guidelines about the content of our prayers. When things are going well it is easy to rejoice and give thanks, but when they aren't going so well it may be harder to pray that way. In this case these guidelines can help us make an important attitude adjustment. If nothing else, we can rejoice that in spite of the appearance of our circumstances, God is still in control. We can give thanks for the promise of Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Bible Reading/Study

Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.”

2 Tim 3:16-17 “[16] All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, [17] so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

A friend of mine once challenged me to start reading the scriptures when he told me how he decided to be more intentional about it. He held up his copy of the Bible and said, “If this really is the Word of God, shouldn’t I know what it says?”

As I considered his question, I realized that even though I had been attending church regularly for quite some time, and even though I had attended several Sunday School classes and Bible study groups, there were significant portions of the Bible to which I had never been exposed. I was convicted by his question and adjusted my schedule to daily set aside time for scripture reading.

It took a little time to figure out a pattern of reading that was good for me and the time I had to spend on it. First I picked a specific time to do it. For me, it was about just before bed time. The amount of time I decided to spend varies a little but runs about 5 to 10 minutes. I read until I turn a page, and then continue reading to the next chapter break. Then I leave a book mark on the page where I left off. The next day I can pick it up again, open to the book mark, and begin reading at the first chapter break on those two pages.

After that kind of regular reading for several years, I discovered something else I had been missing by not doing that. There is a larger story hidden in the whole context of the scriptures about God’s love for us and His desire to give us a wonderful life. I

have come to view the Bible more as God's love letter to the human race.

Another great benefit is that after having read the scriptures over and over again for several years, I find that often just the right scripture comes to mind when I need it. This is very helpful when I am trying to make personal decisions and also when trying to help a family member or friend who is facing some kind of dilemma.

Scripture memorization is another way to study that many people have found helpful. If you feel drawn toward that, there are many web sites that you can look to for guidance.

Church Participation

> Hebrews 10:24-25 "[24] And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, [25] not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

I often hear this passage quoted as encouraging regular attendance at church. I used to think if I was in church more Sunday's than not, I was satisfying the intent of this passage. I was focusing primarily on the middle part of the passage, "…not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing…", and missing almost entirely the phrases that begin and end it, "…spur one another on toward love and good deeds…" and "…encouraging one another…". When I view it from a spiritual practice perspective I see that it offers so much more than just an obligation. I see that it holds the possibility that I might not only receive spiritual growth benefits but also it gives me an opportunity to give back to the community as well.

When speaking about church participation it is natural to think first about our attendance in worship. A little self-examination is appropriate. How often are you in worship? Are you there almost every week or is this an area that needs improvement? Does your worship seem like something you look forward to every week or does is seem more like a chore that needs to be done?

When considering church participation as a spiritual practice, start by taking a personal inventory of the gifts and graces with which God has endowed you. What things are you good at? What things do you enjoy doing? It could also be a good idea to ask a couple of people who know you well to help you with the list. Sometimes we have gifts we don't recognize, but others may see them more clearly.

When you have finished your list of gifts and graces, compare it to a list of committees, groups, projects, and ministries in your local church. If you find a good match, maybe you should get involved. When you give of yourself in this way, you will be surprised by how much you get back in return. When you are involved with others in this manner there will be many ways you are encouraged and can encourage others in their walk with the Lord.

Meditation

> Joshua 1:8 "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."

Meditation has been around much longer than the Christian church. The New International Version of the Bible uses a form of the word "meditate" 18 times in the Old Testament. The first reference being that Isaac had gone out to his field to meditate

when he saw his father's servant approaching after going to find a wife for him.

Christians have used meditation in one form or another for almost as long as the church has existed and found it very helpful if not essential for building and maintaining a close relationship with the Lord. Many forms and variations of meditation have been developed and used over the years but the central purpose of all of them is to find a way to quiet our minds so that the Spirit of God can speak to us in the silence.

In Lectio Divina (divine reading) one starts by reading a short passage from scripture slowly with a pause between readings, find a word or phrase that catches your attention, think about that word or phrase for a while and then just sit quietly to allow the scripture to settle into your heart.

In Centering Prayer the goal is to spend the time quieting the mind by releasing any thoughts and allowing them to pass by rather than following them down all the "bunny trails" they are likely to try to take us. The use of a "sacred word" can help remind us to let thoughts go and return to focus on the quiet. More detailed information on both of these forms of Christian meditation can be found on line through your favorite search engine.

There are many other forms of meditation most of which can be used in a Christian context but if you are looking for someone to teach you more about meditation you should be careful who you invite. Not everyone who teaches meditation is interested in helping you find a closer relationship with our Lord.

How often to meditate and how much time to spend each time are also issues to consider. With Centering Prayer they recommend trying to do it twice a day and spend 20 minutes at it each time. They also say that if you cannot spend that much time

with it, whatever time you can spend is better than not meditating at all. I am not familiar enough with any of the other forms of meditation to know if they have any recommendations for time or frequency.

Volunteering

> Luke 6:38 "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Many people think of this verse only in a context of giving money, but I have found the promise to be true when volunteering too. When we give our time to a worthy cause God finds a surprising number of ways to return the blessing.

If you want to try volunteering as a spiritual practice, be sure to choose what you volunteer for carefully and prayerfully. Over committing yourself can lead to burn-out and exhaustion.

Giving

> Malachi 3:8-12 "[8] Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' "In tithes and offerings. [9] You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. [10] Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. [11] I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe," says the LORD Almighty. [12] "Then all the nations will call you

blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty."

In this scripture God makes it pretty clear that He considers the tithe (the first 10 percent of what we get) to be His. Verse 9 tells me that those who do not tithe will find themselves struggling in one way or another. This is also one of the few places where God invites us to put Him to the test. Try tithing for a while and see if your blessings don't increase noticeably. This is really a spiritual issue. Do you trust God enough to supply your needs if you give Him the first 10%? Or do you simply not believe that God is capable of keeping His word?

Here is another reason to consider giving generously.

Luke 12:33 "Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys."

A lot of Americans have some kind of retirement account where they or their company are saving money towards their retirement years during this lifetime, but how many of us have considered storing something towards our ultimate "retirement" when we get to heaven. An added bonus is that our heavenly treasure is not going to be subject to changes in value due to market fluctuations the way financial accounts are affected here on earth.

I have talked to a lot of people who tithe and have come to the conclusion that there probably are no ex-tithers. We just believe we can't afford not to tithe.

Daily Devotional Guide

> Deut 11:18-21 “[18] Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. [19] Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. [20] Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, [21] so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.”

This spiritual practice is one that only takes five to ten minutes each day. There are many daily devotional guides available in a variety of formats and prices. Some are bound books with 365 devotions designed for a whole year. “Daily Guideposts” is one of those that are published new each year with each entry dated and planned for that day of the year. Other yearly guides have their devotions numbered so you can start any time of the year and continue for 365 days. I have even found one guide with morning and evening devotions for each day of the year (“Grace For The Moment” by Max Lucado). The devotions in that guide are dated but not referenced to a specific day of the week so it could be used any year. (There is no devotion for February 29 so if you are using it in a leap year you get a day off.) Some guides are published every two or three months. A couple of examples are “The Upper Room” which is available by subscription and “Our Daily Bread” which is one that is free (look for either one of them on your favorite internet search engine). I have found it helpful to pick a certain time of the day and then get in the habit of doing it at the same time each day. I typically read mine right after dressing in the morning but before eating breakfast. By tying it to activities you do every day it is easier to build it into a habit so you don’t have to work so hard to remember to do it.

Spiritual Books/Magazines

> Luke 6: 43-45 “43 No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. 44 Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briers. 45 A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”

If you are one of those who enjoy reading you could turn one of your pastimes into a spiritual practice by just changing the reading material you select. There are literally hundreds of thousands of choices in Christian books and magazines. With an internet search engine or an inquiry at a Christian bookstore, you can easily find what interests you most in just about any genre or topic you prefer. As our scripture from Luke shows, the things we fill our hearts and minds with are the things that are most likely to come out of our mouths. This is one way to ensure that the words we speak will usually be ones that honor God.

Spiritual Retreats

> Neh 8: 1-12, 18 “1 All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.
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> 2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. 3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

[4] Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden
platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood
Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and
on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum,
Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

[5] Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him
because he was standing above them; and as he opened it,
the people all stood up. [6] Ezra praised the LORD, the great
God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded,
"Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the
LORD with their faces to the ground.

[7] The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub,
Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad,
Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while
the people were standing there. [8] They read from the Book
of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so
that the people understood what was being read.

[9] Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher
of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people
said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do
not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as
they listened to the words of the Law.

[10] Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet
drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared.
This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the
LORD is your strength."

[11] The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this
is a holy day. Do not grieve."

[12] Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send
portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because

they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly."

This may be the earliest record of a spiritual retreat. I'm sure they didn't call it that at the time but it bears all the marks of one. It appears that they set aside a whole week to study the scriptures in detail. I have found spiritual retreats to be wonderful ways to spend a little time concentrating on our relationships with God and one another. This is one spiritual practice that time and resources can easily limit but I have always found retreats to be well worth what it costs. One that I enjoy a lot is the 5-Day Academy for Spiritual Formation offered in many communities through The Upper Room. (Go to http://academy.upperroom.org/events/five-day-academies for a list.)

Entertainment Choices

Psalm 101: 1-7 "1 I will sing of your love and justice;
to you, LORD, I will sing praise.
2 I will be careful to lead a blameless life—
when will you come to me?

I will conduct the affairs of my house
with a blameless heart.
3 I will not look with approval
on anything that is vile.

I hate what faithless people do;
I will have no part in it.
4 The perverse of heart shall be far from me;
I will have nothing to do with what is evil.

[5] Whoever slanders their neighbor in secret,
I will put to silence;
whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart,
I will not tolerate.

[6] My eyes will be on the faithful in the land,
that they may dwell with me;
the one whose walk is blameless
will minister to me.

[7] No one who practices deceit
will dwell in my house;
no one who speaks falsely
will stand in my presence."

In this area I am referring mostly to our choices in the movies and television programs we watch and the radio stations or pre-recorded music we listen to. The question we need to ask ourselves is, "Do we have the conviction of the psalmist in the scripture above or do we want to go on pretending that the things we watch and listen to don't really affect the person we are becoming?" If we pay attention to our bodies and their physiological responses while watching television or movies we can see that in a very real way, we are participating in what is happening in that program or show. The way many people listen to radio stations or pre-recorded music is even more insidious since we often use it as background noise and don't consciously pay attention to the messages in the music. As a result it goes directly into our unconscious minds without filtering and can have an even more profound effect on the kind of people we are becoming. This can become an important spiritual practice if we make sure all of our entertainment choices reflect our Christian values.

Forgiveness

> Matt 6:14-15 “[14] For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. [15] But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.
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> Deut 32: 35 “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.
> In due time their foot will slip;
> their day of disaster is near
> and their doom rushes upon them.”

Jesus’ words quoted from Matthew in the first scripture above make it clear that developing a habit of forgiving others is really important. It seems a natural human response that if someone hurts us, we want to hurt them back, to “get even”. The truth is, if we harbor resentment, and hold on to anger we usually do ourselves more harm than to the one we are angry with. In a sense we become their prisoner because we cannot think about that person or event without becoming angry all over again. Forgiveness is not pretending that something didn’t happen or that it didn’t hurt. Forgiveness is really letting go of our “right” to get even and trusting God to settle accounts in the matter according to His promise in Deut 32: 35. It is also not a one-time event but often more like a process that takes time. In my case there have been several issues where I had to remind myself of my decision to forgive many times over. If the pain is particularly acute, we may need to ask God to help us forgive.

Fasting

> Matt 6:16-18 "[16] When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. [17] But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, [18] so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Jesus' words in the scripture above imply several things to us. Because the first word is "when" not "if" he seems to be implying that this is something we all should do at least occasionally. The rest of the scripture reference tells me that our motive for fasting is important too. If we do it to lose weight or impress our friends with our spirituality we will miss out on the real blessings that could be ours through this spiritual practice.

When we think of fasting probably most of us think of denying ourselves food for a period of time. While this may be a common way to fast, it is not the only way to do it. Some people have medical conditions that make it unhealthy for them to fast from all foods for even a short period of time. Some people fast from just certain foods or drinks. Others chose to fast from something they often do. There are some Christian groups that recommend fasting from television for a while. In planning our fast it is wise to consider it prayerfully, keeping in mind the state of health of our body and the impact our fast may have on that. We should also keep in mind what it is that we are trying to accomplish with our fast. Perhaps a couple of examples would be helpful.

On occasions when I was concerned about something and wanted to be more intentional with my prayers I have chosen a short fast to help with that. I would choose a 24 hour period, eat no solid food during that time but continue to drink all of my usual beverages, and then use the hunger pangs to remind me to pray.

Lent is a time that many Christians choose to fast from something so one year I decided to try my own version of that. I chose to give up my evening meal and used the time I would normally spend eating to study and contemplate passages from the book of John.

These are not the only ways or reasons to fast. Fasting when used appropriately can be an important spiritual practice to help us in our spiritual growth.

Witnessing

> Acts 1:8 "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

I believe these words from the Lord are not a suggestion but a command. We are all to be witnesses to what the Lord has done for us. Unfortunately, too many people get scared away from witnessing because they think they have to be prepared to quote scripture to counter any argument a non-believer may use. While that could be helpful if we all were that well versed in scripture, it really is not necessary to get started. If someone does ask a question you can't answer, admit it and offer to look it up or get the answer from your pastor and get back to them. Depending on the technique you use you may never encounter any questions you can't answer. One simple method is like just planting seeds. You can get in the habit of including in your conversations what the Lord has done for you lately. You can start by telling your friends at church and as you get used to doing that, expand to where you are telling most of the people you meet. If the person you are talking to is already a believer you will be encouraging them in their faith. If not then you will be planting a seed for them to think about for a while. They may even decide that they want what you have and start looking for the answer on their own. One way to do that is to wait for someone to ask you how you are. You can reply with something like this, "My life

is so blessed it is almost unbelievable. I have found that the closer I get to living my life the way the Lord wants me to, the more blessings fall in my lap." That can be all it takes to plant the seed. If they ask questions you can answer them. If they don't you don't have to say anything more.

Thankfulness

> Philippians 4:6 "Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

In the spiritual life, attitude is very important. In the story of Israel's transition from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land, one of the reasons they wandered in the desert for forty years was because they had developed a grumbling attitude. The scripture above offers an excellent cure for that kind of attitude. No matter how bad things are we can always find things to be thankful for. Many of us need to make a conscious effort to be more thankful. For some people it could be helpful to make lists of things for which they are thankful. For others, following a pattern in their prayers that includes a time for thanksgiving helps. One way to do that is to use the ACTS prayer pattern. Each letter in the word "ACTS" is for a section of the prayer. The "A" is for adoration. The "C" is for confession. The "T" is for thanksgiving and the "S" is for supplication. However we choose to do it, may we find more time for being thankful than once each year in November.

Spiritual Friendship/Director

> Proverbs 27:17 "As iron sharpens iron so one person sharpens another."

In this section I am combining two different but related practices. Spiritual Friendship is when two or more people meet together on a regular basis to share the details of their spiritual growth with each other, hold each other accountable, and pray for each other. It is a peer-to-peer relationship. When selecting people to meet with for spiritual friendship, be sure to pick people you can trust with the intimate details of your spiritual life. You may want to write a formal covenant that would include a promise of confidentiality. In spiritual direction one who wishes help or guidance with their spiritual life meets with someone who is trained or equipped to provide that help. There are organizations that provide training and/or certification of spiritual directors and may be contacted to find one. One way to find such organizations is through an internet search engine. Spiritual directors may charge a fee for their services so be sure to ask that question when choosing one. The frequency of meetings with a spiritual director is usually negotiable.

Vow of Dedication

Numbers 6:1-5 "The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of dedication to the Lord as a Nazirite, they must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or other fermented drink. They must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. As long as they remain under their Nazirite vow, they must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins. During the entire period of their Nazirite vow, no razor may be used on their head. They must be holy until the period of their dedication to the Lord is over; they must let their hair grow long."

This spiritual practice is based on the Nazirite vow described in Numbers Chapter 6. (A couple of examples from

the scriptures include Sampson and John the Baptist. They were both Nazirites from birth.) As Christians I believe we are free to choose what parts of this vow we will observe. In my use of it I chose to abstain from alcohol and cutting any hair on my head (no hair cut and no shaving). I did not choose to abstain from grape juice since in my church's tradition that would have meant not taking communion. (If your church uses wine in communion you may want to make an exception for that in choosing what parts of this vow you plan to observe.) Choosing an appropriate time period is important too. As a man who has been clean-shaven his whole life, growing a beard very quickly provided reminders of my vow many times each day. Every time I touched my face or looked in a mirror the beard reminded me, therefore, a short period like a couple of months could be effective. If, on the other hand, I had been a woman who did not normally use alcohol in any form, it might be a couple of months before my hair grew long enough to become a frequent reminder of my vow.