

## From Isolation to Connection

In the Classic book, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Richard Foster classifies the disciplines of the Christian Faith in three categories and divides the book accordingly.

\* The Inward Disciplines

Meditation

Prayer

Fasting

Study

\*The Outward Disciplines

Simplicity

solitude

submission

Service

\*The Corporate Disciplines

Confession

Worship

Guidance

Celebration

Because I see the key to spiritual growth is cooperating with the work of God as He conforms you into the image of Christ, I chose to approach the disciplines not by their orientation— inward, outward and corporate, but by the movement that results from the spiritual transformation.

Chapter 1 From Doing to Living

Chapter 2: From Consumerism to Intimacy

Chapter 3: From Busyness to Focus

Chapter 4: From Despair to Hope

Chapter 5: From Isolation to Connection

Chapter 6: From Entitlement to Service

What is important to me is that we see movement in our growth, not whether we master any particular spiritual practice. I see the disciplines as a means, not an end in themselves. To put it another way, my goal isn't that you learn to meditate, but that you live focused lives. One of the things you can do to help accomplish that goal is to meditate on scripture. My goal isn't to teach you how to lament, but to teach you to live life with hope.

However, having said that, there is a shift that is taking place this week for the last two chapters of the study. The first four focused on disciplines that the church does when it is dispersed for the most part, chapters 5 focuses on what we do when we are gathered and chapter 6 on what we do together while we're on mission together. It isn't that we can't do the previous things we've

studied in community or that you can't do what we'll study the next two weeks alone, but that predominately, the things we have studied are done when we are dispersed and the things we are about to study are done when we are gathered.

The strength of our first four weeks together is that they have underscored personal responsibility for Spiritual growth. The strength of what we are about to do reminds us that we are not in this alone, but we are a part of a community of believers who are cooperating with God as he shapes us into Christ's image.

\*"Christians develop relationships with God and His people when they work together for the cause of Christ, resulting in Kingdom expansion and personal spiritual growth."

P 140

\*Today we are focusing on moving from isolation to connection.

In many ways this week's study is foundational on last week's study that dealt with navigating difficult days and learning to invite God into our sorrow. I believe there is a significant problem percolating in the church that places great importance on excellence. I like the way Ray Kollbocker puts it:

\*"There is so much brokenness out there, and yet people come into church and they put on their happy smiles and there is no room for that... because it is not acceptable."

We cannot encounter God in worship if we are pretending that we don't need him because our lives are so together and perfect. We must take care not to turn church into a place to parade our righteousness instead of a place to confess our sinfulness.

Church needs to be more like our 25th High School reunion than our 10th. Do you know that I mean by that? I know a guy that rented a luxury car for his 10th reunion to try to impress his former classmates. By the time we go to our 25th, life has beat us down a bit and we're not trying to impress anyone, we just want to connect with people that were meaningful to us in the past.

We don't gather at church to impress people, we gather because we are needy. We need God and we need one another.

On pages 125 – 127 I tell Ron and his daughter Tammy's story. He is a pastor, she was a drug addict. I share how Ron didn't try to hide his problems from his friends in the church, but he confided in them and got help from them. Ron sums his journey up by saying, "We clung to each other and we clung to our faith."

In the middle of page 127, I ask you if your church cultivates authentic relationships by providing genuine fellowship and support and ask you to check the phrases that apply. Please spend some time at your table discussing what you checked and what you didn't check. After you've done that, take some time to discuss the other questions on the page.

Brainstorm about what you can do to help your church be a safe place where people can connect regardless of their sinful condition.

\*Having authentic relationships with other believers is an attitudinal shift, where we take off the masks and enter into one another's lives. While that is a genuine need, it is just one side of the coin, we also need to connect with God through worship.

Preparation for worship begins long before the alarm goes off on Sunday morning—it is something you do throughout the week. So what are the kinds of things that you do to prepare your heart to stand beside your friends and meet God in your church's worship service.

Take a minute to thumb through your book and look at the disciplines you've already learned to practice during this study and write down the ones that you think would help prepare you to worship.

\*Heartfelt prayer, meditation, celebrating God's presence

\*Unplugging, silence, solitude, rest

\*Lament, confession, celebration, praise

Do you think that if you did those things during the week you'd be better prepared to connect with God on Sunday?

But what if you still didn't feel like worshipping what could you do?

One answer is just to say that we do a lot of things in life that we don't feel like doing—

I didn't feel like going to the dentist yesterday, but I did.

Neither did I feel like sitting in a barber's chair to get a haircut, but I did.

But I want to give you a better answer than that. Sometimes we need others to carry us to the presence of God in a worship service—we lean on others when we can't connect on our own.

\*Robert Mulholland Jr. writes, "When we don't feel like worshipping, the community should carry us along in its worship. When we can't seem to pray, community prayer should enfold us. When the Scripture seems closed for us, the community should keep on reading, affirming and incarnating it around us." *Invitation to a Journey*, 146.

Talk about that quote at your table for a minute—what can we do to carry others along in worship?

If you haven't already, be sure to do the matching activity on pages 140-1, because it is a study of some of the "One Another" scriptures that show how we are to treat one another in our gathering. One of the "one another" passages that isn't in the activity is Hebrews 10:25, which says,

25 not staying away from our [worship] meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (HCSB)

This verse indicates that encouraging one another is a primary function of what we do when we come together.

\*Our church developed a spiritual growth process that places “encouragement” at the core. We did this because we see encouragement as a primary function of what we do when we come together.

Core members of the church are to see their primary role as encouraging others to do three things:

Worship  
Connect  
Serve.

Notice that we’ve already talked about the first two of those things today and we’ll talk about the third next week.

So how do we encourage people to Worship?

Beyond encouraging people to attend, the preparation for worship is done long before we get here, which means we need to be training and developing worshipers who know how to Engage in heartfelt prayer, meditate on God’s word, celebrating God’s presence  
They need to be focused people who practice unplugging, silence, solitude, and rest  
They need to be hopeful people who invite God into their sorrow, confession, celebrate His goodness, and praise.

I’m saying that one way we encourage genuine worship of God is by training people to practice the spiritual disciplines.

Frankly, I don’t think that can be done with a group of 100 plus people like we have here tonight as much as it can be done by living life and interacting one-on-one with others. Perhaps you can take some people through this study in your home and help them participate with God as He is shaping them into Christ’s image.

Not only do we encourage people to worship, but we also encourage them to connect.

That’s as easy as inviting them to a men’s group, to join the softball team or to attend Sunday School with you.

Or it is as messy as becoming an “emergency contact friend” who is there when they need you.