

Developing a Spiritual Workout –

(taken and adapted from Faithwalking 201 notebook, pgs.26-41)

- Read the following thoughts on developing a spiritual workout, focusing on the section, “*Survey of Spiritual Practices*”. Spend half an hour in solitude asking God to show you what disciplines will help you deepen your connection with God.
- Design a Spiritual Workout that includes daily, weekly, and occasional practices. Write it down and share it with at least one other person, preferably three people. Begin to put it into practice.

Developing a Spiritual Workout

It is important to slow down here and think clearly about what is meant by the word “spiritual.” For many, spiritual activities and religious activities are synonymous. In that way of thinking, only the things that are in the part of my life related to God, church, and religion are spiritual. In the Faithwalking community, we use the word “spiritual” to refer to your interior life of thoughts, feelings, and decisions. Furthermore, when referring to your spiritual life, we are highly cognizant that your inner life takes place within your bodily experience. When we refer to spiritual practices, we are including the classic disciplines of prayer, fasting, confession, solitude, and so on. We are also including getting into counseling, meeting with an AA sponsor, or having a coach, and slowing the pace of your life down so that you can reflect on your experience. We are talking about having good eating, sleeping, and exercise practices. All these things have impact and give you access to your inner life. The goal of spiritual formation is to strengthen your capacity to live into the beliefs, values, and convictions that you own as yours in the context of a relationship with God and others. We often refer to that as your true self.

“The spiritual life starts with awareness. Limited awareness equates to a shallow spiritual life. The spiritual journey starts, therefore, with awakening—and with being prepared to awake again and again as we realize that we have once again drifted into sleep.”

– David Benner, *Soulful Spirituality* p. 96

In the introduction to his *Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard reveals a trap that many of us fall into when we try to bring about change in our lives. He uses the example of a young boy who idolizes a major league baseball player. The boy watches the player perform in games— how he hits ball after ball out of the park, runs at lightning speed, and slides into bases. So when the boy goes to play baseball with his friends, he tries to imitate his hero—he swings the bat as hard as he can, runs as fast as he can, and does his best to slide into bases. But, of course, he consistently fails to perform anywhere near the level of his favorite baseball player. Why is this? It’s because he’s trying to imitate what his hero does when he’s “on the spot” rather than imitating the daily regimen he must engage in to make the “on the spot” performance possible. Professional athletes spend hours and hours exercising specific muscles, engaging in focused drills, and practicing every aspect of their game again and again and again; they aren’t able to do the things they do simply by exerting a great deal of effort in the game. But don’t we often make the mistake of the young baseball fan? We look at Jesus and the way he loved and served God in everything, and we resolve to follow his example. We do well for a few days (or a few hours...). We try hard! For a few days we experience some success, and then something happens and we’re back to square one. Often these failures are accompanied by a growing sense of shame or a sense of cynicism and resignation. What if, instead of just trying to imitate Jesus when he was “on the spot,” you imitated him in his everyday lifestyle? Although Jesus’ daily habits aren’t given a ton of emphasis in the gospels, it’s clear that he had a regular practice of getting away from the crowds and spending time alone with God. It was this time spent connecting with God that fueled the rest of his ministry.

Willard makes it clear that if we desire to see real, lasting change in our lives, we must model our whole lives after Jesus’ life. We must make a habit of engaging in practices that are possible for us (e.g., setting aside time in silence and

solitude or developing better sleep habits or setting aside time for reading or participating in a community where confession is practiced— these are a few examples) in order to grow into the kind of people God calls us to be. We can do this by developing a Spiritual Workout—a rhythm of spiritual practices that empower us to live the life that Jesus would live if Jesus were living our life.

A Spiritual Workout is a rhythm of practices that empower you to bring all of what you know about yourself to all of what you know about God. The outcome of consistently engaging in a rhythm of spiritual practices is that you will be able to bring your true self to a loving God, others, and yourself—when it is easy, and when it is really challenging.

End vs. Means

It is imperative to say from the outset that you don't do this to win "righteousness points" with God. In other words, you don't do these things to get God's approval or so that God will love you more. Instead, you do it believing that Jesus knows better than anyone how to experience the fullness of being a beloved child of God who knows with clarity what God created him to be and to do. This is distinctly different from how people often approach spiritual practices. Far too often, a common practice is to ritualistically set aside half an hour in the mornings because you have a vague sense that this is "the right thing to do"— that is, you think that practicing the disciplines brings righteousness, when they were only ever intended to bring wisdom.

When you see the disciplines as an end in themselves rather than a tool to help you connect with God and with yourself as a beloved child of God, you fall into the trap the Pharisees found themselves in: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 5:39-40) Jesus makes it clear that spiritual practices are not an end in and of themselves. In fact, engaging in these practices without seeking to encounter God can even do more harm than good, because it gives the illusion of righteousness without an authentic relationship with God. (This was the experience of the Pharisees.) Once we recognize that the disciplines are a means and not an end, they become a powerful tool for transformation.

Designed to Bring about Breakthrough

The second thing to keep in mind when developing your own Spiritual Workout is that the practices themselves are not the starting place. That is, the first question to ask is not "What practices do I want to engage?" but, rather, "Where do I want to experience transformation in my life?" These may be areas that you've accepted as part of your personality ("that's just the way I am") because you've tried so many times to be different and have never made any progress. Authentically and vulnerably bring that cynicism and resignation to God as you know God, and over time and with practice you will find new hope and a fresh vision for what could be. For now, don't think about how it's going to happen; just take a minute to think about what it is that you want and who you want to be. Consider: What is your desire? Where do you keep getting stuck? What patterns or behaviors have you failed again and again to overcome? What would a breakthrough look like in this area? Take a minute and jot down your thoughts.

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Once you have determined what it is you're seeking, then think about what discipline would be the most helpful. Are you seeking peace? Consider cultivating a regular practice of stillness and solitude. Do you struggle with shame? Try

meditating on God's love or connecting with a coach or a counselor who can provide a safe listening space. Are you lacking joy? Try regularly engaging in an activity that makes you feel fully alive—for example, art, music, athletics, cooking. There are many resources available to give you a survey of the traditional (and not so traditional) spiritual practices. The important thing to remember is that any given practice is only effective insofar as it helps you to connect with the living God.

One huge benefit of a successful Spiritual Workout is that your spiritual practice will no longer be fueled by obligation, but instead be fueled by desire. Instead of engaging a particular discipline because it seems like “a good thing to do,” or “something that I ought to do,” you do it because it will empower you to do things you've never been able to do before. The metric becomes “Is this leading to deeper connection with God and breakthrough in my life?” rather than “Did I do X for Y amount of time?” When a particular practice feels stale and empty, that's no problem—simply try something else.

A few practical suggestions:

- Disrupt your current routine and try something new — You likely have a regular set of practices now that may include some level of prayer, Bible study, service, community, or worship. These practices take place in a current rhythm of eating, sleeping, exercising, working, and relating to others. But the truth is, “every system is perfectly designed to achieve exactly the results it gets.” Every place you're stuck, every area where your relationship practices are not aligned with the way of Jesus, is being maintained by your current routine. If you want different results, you need to use different ingredients in a different rhythm.

“If you are weary of some sleepy form of devotion,
probably God is as weary of it as you are.” — Frank Laubach
- Engage a mixture of daily, weekly, and occasional practices — Some practices you may want to engage in every day at a particular time. Some are better suited to be done weekly, and others (e.g., a full day of solitude) may only happen once every couple of months.
- Start with a few and add more as needed — There can be a tendency at this stage to create a workout that includes every discipline known to man. Unfortunately, this is not in your best interest and will inevitably lead to burnout. Consider beginning with 3-5 practices (and probably only 1-2 that you do daily). If this is manageable and you find yourself wanting more, you can add additional practices slowly as you go.
- Try both traditional and creative practices — There are a few practices that are considered time-tested classics. Specifically, most people could benefit from a regular practice of solitude. However, don't feel limited by the well-known disciplines. Often, the most lifegiving Spiritual Workouts are those that allow you to experience God, yourself, or others in brand new ways. Remember, anything that helps you connect with God, yourself or others can be engaged as a spiritual practice (e.g., going on a walk, getting a meal with good friends, taking one day a week to rest from work, playing an instrument, taking a nap and so on).
- Adjust as needed — Remember, there is nothing magical about any particular discipline. Continually ask the question, “Is this practice helping me connect more deeply and authentically with God, myself and with others?” If it's not, consider putting it aside for a time and trying something different. Your Spiritual Workout is not set in stone. Even if you find a particular rhythm very helpful in one season, chances are you will want to change it up periodically to keep things fresh. Any set of practices can become routine after a while, and it is your current routine that fuels your current practice.

A Brief Survey of Spiritual Practices

Below you'll find a brief description of some of the spiritual practices, as well as a few suggestions to get you started. Much more could be said about each one, and indeed, whole books have been written on many. The information below

is taken from *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (IV Press, 2005) Her book includes much more detail about each of these and dozens of others including very practical exercises, if you're not sure where to begin.

Solitude — The practice of solitude involves scheduling enough uninterrupted time in a distraction-free environment that you experience isolation and are alone with God. Solitude is a “container discipline” for the practice of other spiritual disciplines.

- Give God time and space that is not in competition with social contact, noise, or stimulation.
- Take a retreat or spend some extended time in a place of natural beauty.
- Engage with God alone while you walk or run by yourself.
- Intentionally place yourself in the presence of God. Recognize that God is as near to you as your own breathing. Inhale God's breath of life; exhale all that weighs on you. Simply be alone with God.

Meditation — Meditation is a long, ardent gaze at God, God's work, and God's Word. Slowing down and giving one's undivided attention to God lies at the core of Christian meditation. Be still and listen—spend time mulling over, chewing on, and ruminating over specific passages from the Bible or other inspiring literature, looking for how it applies to your life.

- Try meditating on people—seeing them as God sees them and expressing delight in them as God does.
- Pay attention to God with your body by slowing down, relaxing and breathing deeply.
- Meditate on the life and character of Jesus by chewing on selected passages or stories in which he interacts with God or with others.

Devotional Reading — Devotional reading or “listening” to Scripture requires an open, reflective, listening posture alert to the voice of God. This type of reading is aimed more at growing a relationship with God than gathering information about God.

- Prayerfully dwell on a passage of Scripture.
- Listen deeply for God's personal word to you.
- Read for depth, not breadth.
- Stay with one text until you are prompted to move to another.

Slowing — Slowing is one way to overcome inner hurriedness and addiction to busyness. Through slowing, the sacrament of the present moment is tasted to the full.

- Choose to drive in the slow lane.
- Look people in the eyes.
- Plan buffer time between meetings.
- Chew slowly and sit longer at the table.

Rest — Entering into rest depends on honoring our God-given limits. By paying attention to the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of the body, you learn when and how to rest.

- Schedule margin time into your day for rest and recollection.
- Engage in a restful activity: take a nap, read a book, go on a walk, catch up with a friend.
- Commit to getting a certain amount of sleep every night.
- Develop an intentional rhythm of rest and work in your life.

Unplugging — Unplugging calls you to leave the virtual world of technology to become present to God and others. It recognizes that personal beings are created for personal interaction with a personal God.

- Consider communicating face-to-face rather than virtually.
- Choose to keep your phone silent and out of sight during conversations with others.
- Have a no-email workday.

- Choose to live without certain devices (e.g., phone, TV, iPad) at certain times (e.g., in the evenings, over the weekend).

Discernment — Discernment opens you up to listen to and recognize the voice and patterns of God’s direction in our lives. Take time to listen to God; don’t hurry to decide.

- Attend to the desires God has placed deeply inside you.
- Cultivate a conversational relationship with God in which you make a practice of hearing from God daily.
- Ask God to reveal to you the places you don’t trust God and the ways you misunderstand God’s character.

Examen — The examen is a practice for discerning the voice and activity of God within the flow of the day. It involves regularly coming into God’s presence and asking several questions which may be formulated in many ways:

- When did I give and receive the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today?
- What was the most life-giving part of my day? What was the most life-thwarting part of my day?
- When today did I have the deepest sense of connection with God, others, and myself? When did I have the least sense of connection?
- Where was I aware of living out the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control)? Where was there any absence of the fruit of the Spirit?

Confession & Self-Examination — Self-examination is a process whereby God’s Spirit opens your heart to what is true about you. This is not the same thing as a neurotic shame-inducing inventory. Instead it is a way of opening yourself to God within the safety of God’s love so that you can authentically seek transformation. Confession embraces Christ’s gift of forgiveness and restoration while setting you on the path to renewal and change.

- In the presence of God, ask yourself, “Whom have I injured recently through thoughtlessness, neglect, anger, etc.?” Ask for God’s grace and guidance as you seek to clean up that mess and restore that relationship.
- Ask some of your family and close friends to help you see your blind spots. Ask questions like, “What do I do that hurts you? How could I better love you?” Let their answers guide you in a time of confession.
- Enter a covenant group or an accountability relationship where you cannot hide. Tell the truth about who you are and ask your partner(s) to pray for you and help you change.
- Imagine the kind of person you would like to become in your old age. Then look at your life and assess whether the way you live now is preparing you to become this person. Confess where you need to change. Ask God and your community for help.

Celebration — Celebration is a way of engaging in actions that orient the spirit toward worship, praise, and thanksgiving. It involves identifying and pursuing the things that bring the heart deep gladness and reveling in them before the Lord.

- Where do you most readily connect with God? Go to that place. What do you want to tell God about the joy you receive there?
- Intentionally place yourself in God’s presence. Recall all of God’s gifts, provisions, guidance, and love toward you. Think of a way to celebrate and respond to God’s work in your life—write a song; paint a picture; memorize a verse of praise; invite friends over for dinner and tell your story and listen to their stories, etc.
- Think about the people in your life who bring you joy. Ask God how you might celebrate them in a way that encourages them.
- Consider celebrating the seasons of the Christian calendar (Easter, Pentecost, Advent, etc.) in a new way. Start a new tradition to celebrate God’s work in that season.

Community — Community exists when people connect with each other in authentic and loving ways that encourage growth in experiencing the love of God. They engage in authentic and vulnerable relationships that cultivate, celebrate, and make evident God’s love for all the world.

- Who in your life helps you to connect with God and live into your true self? Make a regular practice of meeting with this person.

- Ask someone to tell you his/her story. Listen to his/her story as deeply as you can. How does the story give you a deeper understanding of your friend, of God, and of yourself? Think about those in your neighborhood or your faith community who are isolated or don't have family nearby. Consider including them in family gatherings. Practice what it is to belong to God's family—not just your nuclear family.
- Engage in mission with others in your faith community.

Additional Resources on Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Disciplines

- *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* by Ruth Haley Barton
- *Invitation to Silence and Solitude* by Ruth Haley Barton
- *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald Whitney
- *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, IV Press, 2005
- *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg
- *Soul Feast* by Marjorie J. Thompson
- "Transformed by the Renewing of Your Mind," Dallas Willard, YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vwlsp67Lg1E> (To skip intro start at 3:00 mark)
- *The Making of an Ordinary Saint: My Journey from Frustration to Joy with the Spiritual Disciplines* by Nathan Foster.
- *Hard Laughter*, a Novel by Anne Lamott

(Trinity Church, Orange City, IA; November 2021, sermon series supplemental resources,
"Discernment: Discovering God's Will,")