

WHEN Spiritual Disciplines BECOME

LEGALISM

BY DAN SCHAEFFER

It was 3:30 in the morning when the alarm went off. I hated getting up at 3:30 *once a week* to be ready by 4:30 to meet with my spiritual mentor at 5:30. But I did it. At that time I measured spiritual growth by a strong quiet time with God—and that quiet time had to be *disciplined*. Discipline, it seemed, was the ticket to true spirituality. And I was determined to be truly spiritual.

Then my mentor encouraged me to discipline myself for the purpose of godliness at 5:30 *every morning* like he did. Out of respect, I didn't ask questions, but I wasn't enamored of the idea. Yet, at 5:30 a.m. I was up, bleary eyed, reading (or attempting to read) my Bible, praying (sometimes incoherently, which is how I do most things at 5:30 a.m.), meditating (which looked occasionally like snoozing), memorizing Scripture and being silent before God.

Every morning I considered myself either a success or a failure depending on whether or not I showed up for work (spiritually speaking).

I was faithful to this schedule, though I didn't enjoy it, nor did I grow from it. It eventually ceased to be meaningful—and my deep dark secret was that I didn't know why, and, in fact, was beginning to resent the *spiritual disciplines*.

What Are the "Spiritual Disciplines"?

Christians have long considered certain behaviors to be the product of Jesus living his life within believers. When we are saved by grace, not by works, God begins to produce his works in our lives (Ephesians 2:8-10). Historically, some of the habitual routines that were considered as products of being in Christ came to be called "disciplines." Biblical evidence for spiritual disciplines includes:

Prayer (Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17), *Bible study* (2 Timothy 2:15, 3:16), *meditation* (Joshua 1:8), *silence before God* (Psalm 46:10), *worship* (Psalm 29:2) and *fasting* (Luke 5:33-35). God can use such spiritual disciplines in our lives, not only producing them in the first place, but using them as his

tools to help us grow in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18).

However, if we're not careful, we can allow the practice of disciplines to become legalism or asceticism, self-denial for self-denial's sake, where we seek to earn God's favor through rigorous self-denial.

Ironically, before I knew about any spiritual disciplines, I used to read my Bible every night. I prayed throughout the day. It seemed so natural—a passion—not a duty.

It was later that things began to get a little unnatural. Slowly the joy seeped out of my quiet times, while ironically, pride seeped in. I was proud of my ability to deny myself and felt a cut above, spiritually. I was doing God a *tremendous* favor!

All throughout the Old Testament God continually railed against his people for doing the right things (sacrifices, festivals, etc.) with the wrong motivation. I know from personal experience exactly how that happens. Gradually, a seismic spiritual shift took place where I found myself spending time with God, not in order to know him better, but in order to fulfill a spiritual duty or obligation. It was discipline, but not for the purpose of godliness.

I began to see God as a demanding school teacher, checking my homework every morning. If I didn't turn it in, I got a zero for the day and went throughout the day wallowing in guilt. But when I showed up, I got my gold star and sent to the head of the class. Sadly, I felt God really liked this arrangement.

Spiritual Disciplines Can Become Legalism

If we're not careful, we can begin to see the disciplines as a way to demonstrate to God (and others) that we're "on task." The disciplines can become little more than a measuring stick by which we attempt to measure our spirituality.

The danger is that I can assume that I am spiritually on track. Yet, if I read the Scriptures but don't truly seek to listen to God, if I pray in simply a mechanical and passionless way, if I fast because I know I'm supposed to, I can *deteriorate* spiritually, all the while thinking I'm making great progress.

When we view the disciplines as spiritual measuring sticks, rather than products of God's grace that enable us to grow closer to and more like Christ, we miss the point. It's like dating your wife or husband because you know you're supposed to. But on your date all you do is stare into space, make small talk and glance continually at your watch wondering how long it will be until this drudgery is over. Your spouse would be neither flattered, nor fooled. Sadly, God is often on the receiving end of this kind of "spiritual date."

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Author and Pastor John Stott once wrote, "A man who loves his wife will love her letters and her photographs because they speak to him of her. So if we love the Lord Jesus, we shall love the Bible because it speaks to us of Him." When we turn the disciplines into legalistic asceticism we have lost the very thing that gives them spiritual value.

The spiritual disciplines aren't rigid rules we must follow like some complicated tax code, but the natural moving of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we seek him. As God beckons us towards him, we respond back, weakly at first, imperfectly, sporadically, like easily distracted children. For that is what we are. Yet the more time we spend with him, the more we get to know him. Not just know *about* him, but know *him* intimately.

Denying ourselves means to renounce our old self and its old desires and replace them with a desire to seek him and serve him first and foremost. The spiritual disciplines are designed to help us do just that. However, they are more than a scheduled spiritual pit stop with God.

A Disciplined Life In Christ

It took me a while before I realized my spiritual discipline had become empty legalism. So, one day I decided I'd just start over. I gave God the best of my time (which wasn't at 5:30 a.m.). When I was awake and ready to face the day, I sat down and read the Bible. I read it to hear my Heavenly Father speak

to me. The only thing that changed was my attitude, but that changed everything. Sometimes I read a chapter a day, sometimes two or three. Sometimes I spent two weeks on one half of a Proverb. Sometimes what God is saying takes time for me to understand, so I wait. There is no hurry.

Instead of plowing mechanically through my laundry list of prayer requests, I began to pray about what I had just read in Scripture. It became a conversation with my Lord, something it was always supposed to be. There were mornings I would spend an hour or more with God, when spending twenty minutes before had seemed like an eternity. And there were times I only spent ten minutes, and God met me there, and we continued the conversation throughout the day. He wasn't keeping track of the time and neither was I. Prayer became instinctive and natural, like two people speaking with each other, both intensely involved in the conversation.

It is hard not to get legalistic about the spiritual disciplines. We tend to ask, "Have I done them?" but not "*How* have I done them?" We are used to asking whether or not we did "it" rather than did I *hear* him? We are used to settling for "mission accomplished" rather than "relationship strengthened."

God gives us no brownie points for mechanically going through spiritual motions. If he did, he would have praised the Pharisees instead of criticizing them—because that was their *modus operandi*.

The spiritual disciplines have great value when approached with a passion to grow closer to the great subject of our discipline, Christ himself. They become empty, legalistic and even counter-productive when we look upon them as spiritual busywork for which we receive spiritual brownie points. □

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