

When You Fail: Tips on the Spiritual Disciplines



Bible reading and Prayer. These are the two most commonly referred to spiritual disciplines on the top of every Christian's "ought to do" list. Personally, I like to use Richard Foster's list of twelve spiritual disciplines because he groups them by fours into inward, outward, and corporate disciplines--but even he admits that the list is not exhaustive.

I've discovered through having honest conversations with people about the spiritual disciplines, however, that there is much confusion over what to expect by "doing" them, and there is a lot of guilt from a sense of failure at not having measured up to their own expectations. Here are a couple of bottom line tips to use the spiritual disciplines correctly.

1. If you feel guilt for not doing a spiritual discipline, it is a likely indication that you are using your performance as the basis of your relationship with God rather than the righteous and finished work of Jesus. **Reminder** from Salvation 101: no matter how much you attain, your righteousness will still be like filthy rags when presented to a holy God. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Christ. Our relationship with God is based on Jesus' performance, which has already been perfectly completed.

2. It is really hard to motivate oneself to continually do something that consistently brings a sense of failure. This is the trap of any "I ought to..." system--from diet and exercise to Bible reading and worshipping. "I ought to exercise 4 days a week, but I only do 2. FAIL." "I ought to pray for my family members more. FAIL." "I'm going to read a Scripture every night before I go to bed. FAIL." After awhile we stop altogether. "I ought to not stop. FAIL."

Reminder: Exercises do not add or subtract merit to the one doing them, but it does benefit one's sense of well-being. If a woman exercises 4 times a week instead of 2, she might not be a better citizen, but she will have a healthier body. If a woman is talking to God frequently about the problems in her family and life, she is not a better Christian, but she will have less anxiety and greater trust in what God will do in her circumstances.

3. Thinking about doing any discipline for "the rest of my life" can be overwhelming.

Reminder: the benefit of the discipline is only for the time it is practiced. If a person tried to think of all the meals they are going to have to eat, and all the grocery shopping that would be involved, and all the food preparation, and all the clean-up that would have to be done after the meal was over--who would ever be motivated to eat?! Each meal is beneficial for the day it is eaten. No one says, "How many times should I eat this week in order to be a good person?" Each meal benefits the person on the day it is eaten. When I talk to God today, I know that He is listening today. When I sit in solitude before God today, I know that I am listening to Him to understand what He wants to say today. When I sing praises of worship in my car, I am filled with joy at that moment.

If you are discouraged, need a reminder of what God thinks about you, who you are in Jesus, what His purpose is in you and the situation around you--read what He says, talk to Him, think about what He is telling you. You are the one who benefits. There is no fail.

But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Hebrews 3:13