

## What is a Spiritual discipline?

*A Spiritual discipline is an intentionally directed action by which we do what we can do in order to receive from God the ability (or power) to do what we cannot do by direct effort.* It is not in us, for example, to love our enemies, we will fail miserably. Always. This strength, this power to love our enemies- that is, to genuinely and unconditionally love those who curse us and spitefully use us- is simply not within our natural abilities. We cannot do it by ourselves. Ever.

But this fact of life does not mean that we do nothing. Far from it! Instead by an act of will we chose to take up disciplines of the spiritual life that we can do. These disciplines are all actions of the body, mind and spirit that are within our power to do. Not always and not perfectly, to be sure, but they are things we can do by choice. For example, by choosing actions of *fasting* we can learn experientially that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deut 8:3, Luke 4:4). By choosing actions of *study* we can learn how the mind takes on an order conforming to the order upon which it concentrates, which is precisely why we seek to turn our mind to all things true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise (Phil 4:8). By choosing actions of *solitude* we can become intimately acquainted with the many things that control us, so that we can be set free from them by the power of God (Mark 6:31).

The Spiritual Disciplines in and of themselves have no merit whatsoever. They possess no righteousness, contain no rectitude. Their purpose – their only purpose – is to place us before God. After that they have come to the end of their usefulness. But it is enough. Then the grace of God steps in, takes this simple offering of ourselves, and creates out of it the kind of person who embodies the goodness of God – indeed, a person who can come to the place of truly loving enemies.

Again, Spiritual Disciplines involve doing what we *can* to receive from God the power to do what we cannot. And God graciously uses this process to make us the kind of person who automatically will do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.

The ability to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done is the true freedom in life. Freedom comes not from the absence of restraint, but from the presence of discipline. Only the disciplined gymnast is free to score a perfect 10 on the parallel bars. Only the disciplined violinist is free to play Paganini's Caprices. This, of course, is true in all life, but is never more true than in spiritual life. When we are on the spot, when we find ourselves in the midst of a crisis, it is too late. Training in the Spiritual Disciplines is the God ordained means for forming and transforming the human personality, so that when we are in the crisis we can be "response-able" – able to respond appropriately.

Taken from: *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*. Richard J. Foster, Dallas Willard, Walter Brueggemann, Eugene H. Peterson. Harper Collins, NY. 2005