Discipleship Enablers Session 9: Abiding with Christ
Video Transcript

Introduction

So far in Discipleship Enablers we have thought about the object and goal of our discipleship (God), the nature of the path we are treading as disciples, when and where we are disciples, what a life of following Jesus actually involves, and begun to think about some of the things which help us and others on the journey - such as forming safe, supportive and challenging environments, and developing habits of paying attention and responding to God.

In this session we're continuing to focus on developing rhythms and habits of life which keep us attached to God, orientated towards the life God invites us into, and sustained for the part we play in God's mission to creation. There is so much to be said about this, but in this session the particular focus will be on the role of Christian spiritual disciplines and practices – holy habits or ways of life – which shape us for Christian discipleship. We'll also look at how we might build or develop a rule or rhythm of life which sustains us in this.

Abiding in Christ is about Love in Action

Have you ever done the 'five love languages' quiz?[1] The idea behind it is that there are five major ways in which people give and receive love: quality time, affirming words, gifts, physical touch and acts of service. All are valuable, but each of us will feel particularly loved when we experience one or two of these. We might also naturally tend to show other people love in one or two ways in particular. The point is that love is not just a feeling - it is shown in action. When we give or receive love in one of these ways, our relationship with another person grows and we experience a secure sense of attachment.

There's a parallel here with our discipleship. Love is not just a feeling but something cultivated through many kinds of good habits or practices, some of which are sometimes called 'spiritual disciplines'. These might include prayer, Bible study, service to others, or gathering in worship. Spiritual disciplines and practices are given to help us deepen our walk with God and participation in God's work of love.

A healthy rhythm of spiritual practices and disciplines also has a second role in our discipleship: to help us deal with sin and its consequences in our lives. In Galatians 6.7-8 Paul says observes that we reap what we sow. If we sow in selfish and sinful ways, we will reap the consequences. But, Paul says, if we 'sow in the Spirit' we will reap eternal life. Picking up on this, Richard Foster describes spiritual disciplines and practices as 'God's way of getting us into the ground [like a seed in good soil]; they put us where God can work within us and transform us'.[2]

But they also help re-order our loves, desires and priorities away from what does us harm and crowds God out. In other words, rightly used, spiritual disciplines and practices help us move forward in godly ways, and also help prevent us growing in sinful or harmful ways. In this

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[1] You can take the quiz here: https://5lovelanguages.com/ Although it's not an explicitly religious quiz, Chapman is a Baptist minister by background. It's worth noting that the 'love languages' have not had a great deal of empirical testing, but nevertheless many people have found the idea helpful.

[2] Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: the Path to Spiritual Growth* (1978, p.8)

respect, it's important to notice that Christian spiritual disciplines and practices aren't just a coping mechanism for life's challenges or the current state of the world - something to help us feel better when things are tough; they're actually meant to shape and strengthen us to live faithfully – and sometimes counter-culturally.[3]

Jesus the True Vine

Many people think it's no accident that in John's Gospel, Jesus' final words to the twelve before his arrest and crucifixion open with a long passage about the central importance of abiding in Christ:

> *15 [1]"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. [2] He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. [3] You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. [4] Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. [5] I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. [6] Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [7] If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. [9] As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. [10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. [11] I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*
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> *[12] "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. [13] No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. [14] You are my friends if you do what I command you. [15] I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. [16] You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. [17] I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another"* (Jonh 15.1-17, NRSV).

Discipleship Growth: Growing Organically – and through Training and Pruning

This image of the vine and branches is really rich and helpful: at the centre of our discipleship is our attachment to God: Jesus is the true vine; our life source. Our growth as disciples comes through nothing else. In being attached to Jesus we also recognise we are of the same 'plant' as other followers of Jesus; through him we are brought into relationship with others. His love helps us love others. And together, we bear good fruit in the world. That good fruit is only possible insofar as we are attached to Jesus the true vine.

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[3] Rebecca Konyndyck de Young, 'Christian Formation Workshop: Concluding Remarks' (from *Practice Unto Virtue: The Role of Christian Practices in Virtue Formation*, 2026 Martin Institute Christian Formation Workshop) https://conversatio.org/collections/christian-formation-workshop-2026-practice-unto-virtue-the-role-of-christian-practices-in-virtue-formation/

Like a vine, our growth in Christ is organic: we're not stamped out on a production line but grow in all kinds of unique ways as we are attached to the true vine. But our growth doesn't just happen: we are trained and pruned by God, the gardener. As anyone who has tried to grow grapes knows, the growth needs to be supported on a trellis or frame. The trellis helps the vine grow upwards and outwards, keeps the plant off the floor where it can suffer mould and disease, and produces better fruit because the air and sunlight can penetrate throughout the plant. In this respect, the 'training and pruning' not only helps us bear fruit as Christians, but also help us tackle those areas of our lives in which our desires and priorities point away from God and need re-orientating. Most of us know that simply trying harder doesn't tend to get us anywhere. Spiritual disciplines and practices offer us an alternative: we 'train in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3.16).

Many people have found this image of a vine supported by a trellis a helpful image of the importance of spiritual practices and disciplines. For those who find pictures helpful, the image of a trellis and vine is offered as a visual planning tool for identifying some spiritual disciplines and practices you can build into your life (see below). It reflects the way that throughout the New Testament, images of spiritual growth tend to fall into two main types: the organic (like a plant) and the technical (like being trained on a trellis).[4] John 15 seems to suggest we grow best when we have both.

Introducing Spiritual Discipline and Practices

In this session we are focusing on developing (and helping others develop) spiritual disciplines and practices as the 'trellis' which keeps us attached to the Vine. And in a moment, we'll look at a few of them. But first, a couple of points about language:

- **Spiritual Disciplines sound scary!** It's also worth acknowledging that not everyone warms to the phrase 'spiritual disciplines'. It can sound boring, forbidding or even oppressive. However, essentially a 'spiritual discipline' is just a habit which we consciously choose to develop and maintain to keep us focused on God and the life God invites us into. If the language of 'disciplines' would be alienating in your church context, you could always talk of 'holy habits' or 'faith habits' instead, as various authors have done.[5] The label matters less than actually doing it.

- **Why 'Disciplines' and 'Practices'?** Sometimes these two words are used to mean the same thing; some Christian writers see 'disciplines' and 'practices' as slightly different things; disciplines being more like tools which help you do something, and practices being more like habits or ways of life which express something of God's heart for the world.[6] But whatever we call these things, doing them is more important than having the right definition in our head.

Some Classic Spiritual Disciplines

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[4] Joanna Colicutt, *The Psychology of Christian Character Formation* (2015). In this book, she writes particularly about the 'fit body' (technical) and the 'flourishing plant' (organic) as two important New Testament images of Christian growth.

[5] Andrew Roberts, *Holy Habits* (2016); Emma Timms, *Faith Habits and How to Form Them: 21 Seasonal Practices to Strengthen your Spiritual Life* (2025).

[6] Anyone wanting to go into this in real depth could look at Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Everyday Life* (2002).

So what are the practices and spiritual disciplines which Christians throughout the centuries have found help them keep connected to God, loving others and bearing fruit in the world? First as a starting point, here's a list of some of the most influential and widely-practiced within historic Christianity, taken from Richard Foster's classic book *Celebration of Discipline*:

Some Classic Christian Spiritual Disciplines - with some example Bible verses (list based on Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 1978)		
'Inward' Disciplines	**'Outward' Disciplines**	**'Corporate' Disciplines**
Meditation *(on God, Scripture, etc.)* *Psalm 119.97-102*	**Simplicity** *(detachment from desire for material things, status and power)* *Philippians 4.12*	**Confession** *(which helps us repent and heal the wounds between us and God, and each other)* *1 John 1.5-10*
Prayer *(personal, private prayer)* *Mark 1.35 or Luke 11*	**Solitude** *(cultivating habits of stillness on one's own to spend time with God and cut through the world's 'noise')* *Mark 6.31, Luke 6.12*	**Worship** *(focusing our devotion on the one true God)* *Matthew 4.10*
Fasting *(going without food or other material things for limited times in order to focus on God)* *Matt 6.16 - 'when you fast…'*	**Submission** *(to Christ first and foremost, but also 'submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ'). NB: not an excuse for dominating or manipulating others!* *Mark 8.34, Ephesians 5.21*	**Guidance** *Collectively seeking to discern God's will in particular situations (Acts 15)*
Study *(of the Bible and the wisdom in Christian tradition, and study of the world in the light of the Gospel)* *Philippians 4.8*	**Service** *(seeking the good of others in practical ways, in God's name)* *Matt 20.25-28*	**Celebration** *(Cultivating regular times of joy and thankfulness)* *Philippians 4.4 - 'rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice'.*

One useful thing to note is how these are grouped into 'inward', 'outward' and 'corporate' disciplines. In other words, some of these rhythms are focused on our personal, private walk with God; others deal with how our inward attitudes and dispositions shape our outward lives as individuals; others are about how we live together as church. It's likely to be healthy and life-giving to develop holy habits within each of these three areas of our lives.

Shared – as well as Personal - Practices

With that in mind, it's worth noting that spiritual disciplines and practices are for church communities or small groups as well as individuals. Dorothy Bass has suggested 12 practices which together, over a long period of time, form a way of life for Christian communities which express something of God's purposes for creation:

- **We honour our own and each others' bodies** (as a temple of God's Spirit)
- **We practice hospitality** (because God has shown hospitality to us)
- We practice **good household management** (as a way of honouring and caring for what God has blessed us with)
- We lay our choices before God, **saying yes** to what allows God into our lives, **and saying no** to what crowds God out
- **We keep sabbath** (as a way of remembering God and respecting our limits and creation's limits)
- **We share testimony** (as a way of speaking honestly and faithfully about our experience to God, each other and the world)
- **We practice discernment** (intentionally looking for signs of God in our experience)
- **We shape the kind of community** in which people and churches who are reliable in what we say and do
- **We show forgiveness** (because God has forgiven us and Jesus commands us to forgive 'seventy times seven')
- **We take part in acts of healing - spiritual, medical, emotional, etc. -** because healing is what God seeks for the whole of creation
- **We learn to die well** (for example, in the way we are honest about death, we prepare, mourn and lament, and try to live well before God in the face of mortality)
- **We sing Together** (to give full expression to our worship and thanksgiving, and to learn and remember).[7]

Others have suggested slightly different lists of shared practices. David Fitch[8] has suggested seven key Christian practices with strong biblical roots which help form churches stay centred on God, grow as loving communities and also look outwards in mission:

- The discipline of **the Lord's Table** (communion) - 1 Cor. 11.21
- The discipline of **reconciliation** (being reconciled to one another) - Matt. 18.14
- The discipline of **proclaiming the Gospel** (opening the Bible together, preaching, telling others) - Luke 10.10
- The discipline of **being with 'the least of these'** (compassionate loving service) - Matt 25.37-39
- The discipline of **being with children** (welcoming children and learning from them since 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me') - Matt. 18.15
- The discipline of the **five-fold gifting** (developing the ministries of apostles, prophets, pastors, evangelists, teachers) - Eph. 4.11-12
- The discipline of **Kingdom prayer** (as Jesus taught us) - Matt. 6.9

[7] Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing our Faith* (2010 edn).
[8] David Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission* (2016).

Again, these are only a few ways of describing the many biblical habits and practices which keep us Christ-centred. All sorts of things are possible, provided they are not actually opposed to the Gospel and are helpful in keeping us loving God and others.

Making anything (good) a Spiritual Discipline or Spiritual Practice

A third thing to note is that although many of the things discussed so far have a long Christian pedigree, there isn't actually any sort of official list of spiritual disciplines and practices. This is partly because all sorts of things can become helpful Christian disciplines and practices if they are compatible with a Gospel vision of love, and are directed towards God. As Christians, we believe *all* the world is God's - we don't believe there's a rigid division between what is 'sacred' and what is 'secular'. Something like taking five minutes' break every evening to watch the sunset can become a spiritual discipline if we use it as a moment to pause and thank God for creation. To give you an idea of the range of other possible spiritual practices, Emma Timms mentions:

- Journalling
- Setting aside time for an activity which refreshes you - e.g., a hobby or time outdoors
- Working with a spiritual director
- Going on retreat
- Committing to set aside quality time on a regular basis with a loved one
- Pilgrimage
- Doing a seasonal or annual life review[9]

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's very practical and helpful *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* suggests a range of other disciplines and practices too, including:

- Slowing down
- Unplugging from technology
- Sobriety
- Scripture memorisation
- Control of the Tongue
- Stewardship of time, money or talents[10]

Timeless and Timely Spiritual Disciplines/Practices

Spiritual disciplines and practices tend to be things that we decide to do over time, rather than once or twice only. They form a way of life, or a set of 'holy habits'. Many of the better-known Christian disciplines and practices are timeless in nature – that's to say they are things that have been taught as soul-shaping activities throughout Christian history, and they don't have a 'use-by date'. Prayer and Bible study would be good examples. However, other practices are timely – things that we might want to pay special attention to in view of our current circumstances. That can mean 'timely for us as individuals'; something we choose to do regularly for a season in response to our life circumstances. Or it can mean 'timely responses to trends in the society or culture around us'. Sometimes, the times we live in call for particular disciplines and behaviours

[9] Emma Timms, *Faith Habits and How to Form Them: 21 Seasonal Practices to Strengthen your Spiritual Life* (2026).
[10] Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (2005)

to keep us living faithfully and avoiding the pitfalls of our society. For example, in his book *The Common Rule*, Justin Whitmel Early suggests eight practices which can help people constantly distracted by modern, urban, technological living:

- Daily:
    - Kneeling in prayer 3 times a day
    - Eating at last 1 meal with others
    - Spending 1 hour with your phone off
    - Reading scripture before switching on your phone
- Weekly:
    - 1 hour of conversation with a friend
    - Reducing media consumption to 4 hours a week to free up time for other things
    - A 24-hour fast from something every week
    - Keeping a 24 hour sabbath.[11]

To offer another example, Brooklyn-based pastor Rich Villodas suggests in his context (contemporary, multi-cultural, inner urban USA) important and timely practices might include…

- Developing **contemplative rhythms**, as an antidote to the exhausting 'work, eat, sleep, repeat' nature of modern life.
- Committing ourselves to be involved in activities and behaviour which promotes **reconciliation between cultures and ethnic groups**, as an antidote to the current climate of racism and division between people.
- Taking regular time to **examine our thoughts, words and deeds**, as an antidote to a superficial culture obsessed with image.
- Practices of **treating our and other people's bodies well**, as an antidote to unhealthy attitudes to sex, touch and the body in society (and sadly in church).
- Practices of **paying attention to, and being with, others** as an antidote to a culture of hurry and distraction created by modern communications technology.[12]

Creating a Rhythm/Rule of Life

One of the most useful things we can do to scaffold our life as Christians is to make conscious choices to engage regularly in practices and disciplines which help us stay close to God, participating in a Christian community, loving others and playing our part in God's mission. We can develop our own rhythm/pattern of of holy habits, or we can even shape these into a more formal 'rule of life' and invite others to keep us accountable in following it.

Here's a simple definition of a rule of life from spiritual director Emma Timms. Note how it echoes what has already been said about the 'trellis and vine': A rule of life, she writes, is:

> *…a support system that helps your life grow and flourish. The rule is the trellis, your life is the flower. The rule helps your life to not fall down and guides your direction. It stops it from being destroyed by a storm and literally provides something for you to cling on to. It is not your life. It is not the point of your life. You can definitely live without one. But it*

[11] Justin Whitmel Early, *The Common Rule: Habits if Purpose for an Age of Distaction* (2019), 25.
[12] Rich Villodas, *The Deeply-Formed Life: Five Transformative Values to Root us in the Way of Jesus* (2020).

> *will help you cultivate the life Jesus invites us into, especially if you want to live a life that overflows from connection to God.*[13]

In this session, we will spend some time hearing the experiences of people who have worked with a rule of life over a number of years, and exploring how one we can begin to create a rule of life which is appropriate to each of our own life circumstances.

[13] Timms, *Faith Habits and How to Form Them*, p. 15.