

Passionate Discipleship

Six Foundations

A Canadian Baptist Youth Initiative

Foundation #2

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES



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Passionate Disciples Practice Spiritual Disciplines

The Why

I grew up on a farm, where I witnessed the life cycle of many animals. All animals, from barn cats to cows, have one thing in common: they are born helpless. Left on their own, they would never survive in this hostile world. But with care and training from their mothers and from those of us that worked on the farm, the kittens learned where to get a drink of fresh warm milk and how to catch mice for a meal. The calves learned how to stand, where their meals came from, and eventually how to eat grass and avoid the electric fence! As farmers, we knew how to provide a safe place where animals could grow and learn to become mature and self sufficient.

Yet as youth leaders, we often neglect care for the spiritual lives of the students we work with. We hope they will graduate from our youth ministries as maturing young believers, but we aren't intentional about teaching them how to provide for their own spiritual needs. We usually encourage them to read the Bible and pray regularly, and may introduce a structured Bible memory program, but often it ends there. Perhaps the problem, in many cases, is that our own personal learning has never gone beyond this point! As we look at this topic, I suggest we start by admitting we have a lot to learn, and opening our heart to the wisdom and experience of the Bible and other believers who have been grappling with these issues for centuries.

A common reaction to the phrase 'spiritual disciplines' is one of wariness and scepticism. It sounds like something that might be useful for monks or perhaps a few pious senior pastors, but not for hands-on youth ministry people like us! And discipline certainly never sounds fun!

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster (1988) reminds us that "the primary requirement" for practicing the spiritual disciplines "is a longing after God." (Foster, 1988, p. 2) We don't need theological degrees or to spend years meditating in the solitude of a cave. We simply have to love God and desire to know him more than we currently do.

Based on this understanding, we are doing a disservice to our students if we don't deliberately take the time to model and teach them the spiritual disciplines. The goal of this chapter is to introduce some of the spiritual disciplines and suggest some ways they could be introduced in your youth ministry.

The What

Simply put, spiritual disciplines are practices that can help you grow to know God better, and more fully understand his purpose for you. This section will introduce only a few of the many different disciplines. I firmly believe that every Christian should learn about and experiment with all of them. As each of us has a unique personality, we should expect that a few of the disciplines will become more meaningful to us than others. This does not mean that we should abandon the others, but it may help us decide which will become a more integral part of our spiritual journey. For the purposes of this chapter I will focus on only

six of the disciplines, ones that I believe are being seriously neglected in our churches and youth ministries.

Solitude

The youth we work with have more distractions and opportunities than any previous generation. In the midst of ever-present communication and never-ceasing opportunities, it is a true discipline to carve out time to be alone in the presence of God. Each year, I work with a group of very gifted grade 12 students. When I give them an uninterrupted hour to spend alone with God at a weekend retreat, most of them say it is one of the best gifts they have ever received!

In Psalm 46:10, we are directed to “be still and know” that God is God. It is often in solitude, when we are actually listening, that we can hear the still, small voice of God. Our souls, and the souls of our students, need to have quiet times of refreshing. As youth leaders we need to make sure that we practice solitude ourselves, and that we encourage and give opportunity for our students to do the same. During the weekly times we spend with students, we should make it a goal to routinely set aside time for them to be quiet in God’s presence. When we have the privilege of spending extended time with students at retreats or other events, it is imperative that we give them the gift of time to spend with God. The amount of time, and the direction you give them for using the time, will have to be adjusted for the group, but all students will definitely benefit from meeting God in this way.

Fasting

Fasting is the practice of giving something up in order to devote the time, energy or resources to God. This denying of self goes against everything our culture teaches us, yet it is at the core of the gospel. In Scripture, fasting refers to going without food for a set amount of time in order to demonstrate to God our depth of commitment to something, such as seeking forgiveness (Joel 1:14) or seeing God act in a certain way (Esther 4:16).

Often we consider fasting an option, but it should be an act of obedience. Jesus prefaced his teaching on fasting with “When you fast...” (Matthew 6:17) not “if you fast...” As we encourage our students to make fasting part of their discipleship, we need to do so carefully. The Bible contains many warnings about things to avoid when we are fasting: wrong attitudes and actions (Isaiah 58:3-4) and looking for attention (Matthew 6:16-17). A good way to introduce students to fasting is to have a core group or leadership team give up one meal a week in order to pray together. We should also regularly mention fasting in our teaching as a way of more fully knowing God.

Corporate Worship

Many people have a poor understanding of worship. They may think it is confined to singing, and specifically singing in a style that they personally enjoy – something that gives them an emotional buzz! But in the Bible, worship refers to what God’s people bring him. People worshipped with singing, dancing, gifts, sacrifices, and through bringing their families and friends with them. We also learn that

worship can be misplaced (Luke 4:9-10), and that without the right motives and lifestyle it can be meaningless (Matthew 15:9).

As we work with students, we frequently hear about the problems with worship. The songs are too old, the choir is pathetic, the organ music is reminiscent of a funeral, and most of the people in the congregation seem to be simply enduring the routine of another Sunday! We are presented with a two-fold challenge. First, we need to teach our students that corporate worship is about what we bring to God. Second, we need to be catalysts that push for a real, vibrant and life-changing worship setting. If our students experience worship that is centred on people sacrificially bringing their gifts, their talents, and their families and friends, the type of music or the quality of the singing will no longer be as important.

Meditation

Within the North American church, many people associate meditation with Buddhism, Hinduism, or some sort of strange and mystical experience, so it should be no surprise that we rarely hear the word used within our youth ministries. At the same time, today's youth are often drawn to spiritual experiences that aren't part of mainstream faith communities. This provides us with an open door to introduce them to a discipline that has connected people with God for centuries.

A quick glance at the Bible shows that the word "meditate" is used 16 times (NIV). Of these, 14 are examples of individuals or the worshipping community meditating, and two are direct commands to meditate. Seven of the 16 refer specifically to meditating on Scripture and six speak of meditating on God's attributes (his love, deeds and promises).

By introducing the biblical practice of meditation into the structure of our youth ministry, teaching students how to meditate, and talking about our own experiences, we foster a greater connection between students and their Creator. Meditation doesn't have to be a complicated practice. Ask students to read prayerfully through a verse several times and encourage them to reflect on what stands out. In my experience, I have found that students greatly enjoy this type of exercise.

Study & Memorization

It seems obvious that in order to grow closer to God we ought to spend time studying the Bible and memorizing God's Word, but practice does not always bear this out. Perhaps we value the Bible less than people did a generation or two ago because it is so accessible, available on the internet or PDA in any translation we desire.

God has given us the Bible as a primary way to know him and his desires for us, and as youth leaders we need to take this very seriously. Here are a few things we can do to build an awareness of, and a love for, the Bible:

- Use an actual Bible, not a printout or digital copy
- Encourage students to bring and use their own Bibles
- Provide Bible reading suggestions for their personal quiet times

- Provide an atmosphere where questions about the Bible are always welcome
- Teach and model the importance of Bible memorization
- Provide regular encouragement to memorize the Bible
- Have a key verse for the month that leaders and students memorize

Simplicity

Living in a country where the prevailing attitude is ‘whoever has the most when they die wins’ – and growing up in churches that often seem to operate on the same philosophy – it is no wonder that living in a simple manner is a foreign concept to our students. Many of them are torn between these two lifestyles. They know more about the global community than any generation before them and recognize the problems of inequality and injustice, yet the desire for material things is strong.

As leaders, we have an incredible opportunity to teach youth about a Christ-centred life of simplicity, but all too often our own lifestyles prevent us from being authentic teachers on this topic. The challenge for us is to be open and transparent with our students, to let them know that we struggle with this issue too and that we, like them, want to make changes. Taking this approach keeps us from hypocrisy and opens the door to real change in our lives and the lives of our students.

Conclusion

The lessons I learned early in life as I worked on our family farm are lessons that have stuck with me. Just like young animals need help to gain independence, we need to prepare our youth to be able to feed themselves from the spiritual richness available to them. The spiritual disciplines are one important piece of this puzzle. If we neglect this crucial task, then we have truly missed out on our primary responsibility.

We’re looking for real life examples of this! Please send your stories and photos to:
communications@cbmin.org

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. Which of the spiritual disciplines have been most formative in your own life?
2. Which of the disciplines have you been neglecting in your own life? Do you need to learn more about some of them?
3. Come up with some specific ways that each of these disciplines could be incorporated into your youth ministry.

Recommended Resources:

Willard, D., & Frazee, R. (2005). *Renovation of the Heart: An Interactive Student Edition*. NavPress: Colorado Springs.

Ortberg, J. (2002). *The Life You've Always Wanted*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids.

Foster, R. (1988). *Celebration of Discipline*. Harper: San Francisco.

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