

Developing a Rhythm of Life: A ‘Spiritual Fitness Plan’ A Thematic Study

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Introduction: A Plan for Changing Our Diet

Today I’d like to help us talk about having a meaningful disciplined pattern in our spiritual lives. In anything we desire, we set up a disciplined pattern in our lives to work towards it. For example, in the last six months, my wife and I and various people in our neighborhood community applied some discipline to the way we eat. Let me share with you the results of eating healthier. I used to have carpal tunnel syndrome in my hands. Because I use the keyboard a lot for work and personal journaling, I developed pain in both hands. I would wake up in the morning and my fingers would feel stiff and in pain. When I tried to open jars, I couldn’t do it. I did everything I could think of to heal my hands. I bought an ergonomic keyboard. Then I bought a vertical keyboard. Then I bought voice recognition software. Still, there was enough keyboard use that my pain continued. Then my family and I cut out white refined sugar, because I learned that the processing of refined sugar makes it an inflammatory to our joints. We switched to organic turbinado sugar for everything homemade, and I refused to eat anything with white sugar in restaurants or coffee shops. No donuts, no pastries, no candy, no soda, no juices with sugar, no ice cream. Within one month, I had no more joint pain in my hands. I feel completely healed. I’m back to using my laptop keyboard only, without any special keyboard, without voice recognition, and my hands feel normal. What’s more, my kids’ piano teacher had the same experience. She had arthritic pain in her hands. When she cut out sugar, the pain went away. When she eats something with sugar, especially refined sugar, her hands are wracked with pain.

We don’t use white refined flour either, because white refined flour is just a simple carbohydrate, which means it’s a sugar with almost no nutrients. All that stuff you eat made of white refined flour is just sugar: most bread, almost all cereal, bagels, pancakes, waffles, muffins, croissants, hot dog and hamburger buns, white pasta, pizza dough, crackers, and flour tortillas. This is why one out of every three Americans born after the year 2000 will have diabetes. As if that weren’t bad enough, companies sometimes mix a plastic called bromine into white flour; you do not want to put plastic into your body because that leads to cancer and psychological problems. We do buy whole wheat flour from the store, or more often we make our own flour from whole wheat kernels because we have a small mill, so we can make our own bread, our own pancakes and waffles, and our own pizza dough. As a result of these changes, we’ve lost weight, we have more consistent energy levels, we have better teeth, and we probably get sick less often.

Now I could go into more detail, and it’s worth a separate conversation, but my point here is that obviously this means a lot for our schedule, our rhythm of life. Rather than buy canned beans, because there’s a preservative in there, we buy dry beans and then soak the beans in water the night before we cook them. We buy fresh, non-processed food, so we have to think about groceries more intentionally than before. We have to shop at specific stores, like Trader Joe’s and Whole Foods. At first it felt weird planning ahead for our cooking and shopping. It’s not a lot of extra time total; it’s just involves time earlier to plan. But now, it feels so good. And it makes me feel great that I’m putting good food into my kids’ little bodies. Given how common childhood obesity and diabetes are, we’re also praying about helping our street to be the healthiest street in America.

Relevance: What Do You Plan?

When you push yourself in something, you develop a rhythm, a discipline. If you are training to run a marathon, you follow a plan. You develop a rhythm, a discipline. You run five miles, and then later you go up to ten miles, and then later you go up to fifteen miles. You rest your body more intentionally. If you are trying to be debt free, or save for a house, you follow a plan. You develop a rhythm, a discipline. You think about whether you want to pay \$10 for movies in the theatre or whether you just rent movies from Netflix. You make choices and then you stick to it. If you are trying to lose weight, you follow a plan. You develop a rhythm, a discipline. You plan your meals better; you exercise. If you are trying to have a healthy romantic relationship, you follow some kind of plan together. You develop a rhythm, a discipline

for when you're going to call each other, or when you'll hang out on a date night, what things you like to do together, and how often to hang out with other people.

The issue is that when it comes to life with Jesus, we have a tendency not to think of a plan; we tend to not think of it as a regular discipline or rhythm. And yet we expect ourselves to be transformed and matured and empowered in profound ways. Why? Is it because we want microwavable spirituality? Just pop it in and get something out? 'It's got to be quick, Jesus, like fast food! Come on, give it to me. Don't make me wait. Where's my book on spirituality for busy people?' Is it because we want 'scream in your pillow' spirituality? Are your work life and relationships so hard that you emotionally vent to Jesus about circumstances that you don't like? 'The rest of my life is so hard. Why can't this be easy?' Or is it a theological bogeyman? Because we don't earn our salvation, you think you shouldn't have to earn your maturity? But that's a mistake: We do earn our maturity.

Now I say that because there's a part of me that wants to treat Jesus that way, too. So how do we together develop a rhythm of life, a rhythm of spiritual discipline?

The Goal: Christ's Mission

We first start with defining the goal. Obviously, when you want to lose weight, or run a marathon, you define the goal first and then you can see why the plan takes the shape it does. What is the goal of spiritual discipline in a Christian context? It is to be a better vessel of Jesus' love.

Why do I say that? Because every Gospel – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – ends with a mission that Jesus imparts to his disciples. That mission is to spread his radically transforming love throughout the world. So everything that Jesus did with his disciples, the rhythm and discipline that he instilled in them, was building up to this mission to everyone else. He loved on them to build them up to this mission to everyone else. So being a better vessel of Jesus' love means both receiving him, being transformed by him and expressing him.

Let me give you a few examples of how Christians throughout the ages have thought about this. If you had approached Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement, and asked to join, he would have said, 'Great! Here's what you start doing now. Start reflecting on the life and teachings of Jesus every day.' That was their spiritual rhythm, because they were going to face angry mobs, dogs, fire hoses, taunts and jeers. They did not want to give in to hate and respond with violence, nor did they want to give in to fear and respond with cowardice. Reflecting on the love of Jesus and the courage of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus to love your enemy was the spiritual backbone of black Civil Rights Marchers. Or, the missionary Jesuits led by St. Ignatius practiced a form of reflective prayer every night called the Examen. They examined themselves about two main questions: when were they most aware of God's presence during the day, and when were they not aware of God's presence? This helped make them some of the most radical missionaries the church has ever known. The older Christian orders – the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Benedictines – all developed a community rhythm of life that they agreed upon, in order to accomplish tremendous things.

There's no one right way to do this. It depends on you: What do you feel called to grow in? Are there particular ways that help you be aware of God's presence? I'll show you my 'Rule of Life' and talk you through it, and I want to leave you some time to start a draft of your own. I've broken mine down into personal and community goals, and then within each of those, daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual goals.

Personal

Daily

- Pray, 'Lord Jesus, live your life out through me today'
- Read Scripture with John and Zoe
- Eat healthy foods
- Play with John and Zoe
- Exercise 15 minutes/day

- Give God thanks for everything purchase or consume

Weekly

- Worship with family
- Study Haitian Creole
- Read for my preaching and intellectual development
- Study Scripture for a good chunk of time
 - Gospels: Matthew, John
 - Paul: 1 Corinthians

Monthly

- Journal, especially about things for which I'm thankful
- Evaluate family spending and budget
- Learn about an organization working in the field of global poverty

Quarterly

- Take a long walk with Jesus

Annually

- IVCF staff spiritual formation (2/yr)

Community

Weekly

- The Gathering worship Sunday 1/week
- House dinner and prayer Wednesday 1/week
- Pray for others 2/week
- Prayer for an extended time 1/week, focusing on at least some of the following:
 - listening for campus work
 - listening for my neighborhood and household, youth in neighborhood
 - listening for my family
 - listening for me, praying that I allow Jesus to have more and more of my life
 - interceding for Mom and Dad, John and Zoe
 - praying for missionary friends
 - East Palo Alto, CA: Matt & Susan Martin, Jose & Jennifer Espinosa
 - Boston, MA: Paul & Glenna Malkemes
 - Sudan: Keith & Tricia Blackford
 - South Africa: Nick & Sheila Rowe
 - Indonesia: Lawrence & Annie Cheng
 - SE Asia: W. & C. C.
 - China: Peter & Charisa Kim

Monthly

- Date night with Ming 1 every 2 weeks
- Child care whole day so Ming can do her 1/month day of prayer

Doing Things I'm Not Good At

Now let me point out a few things about this rhythm of life. There are some things I do because I'm not naturally good at doing them. Like be thankful. When I buy something with my credit card, there is a little post-it note on the back of my credit card that says 'Give thanks always.' It's a reminder to me that God made the natural world, from which all our wealth comes. It helps me be content. When I journal, I try to record things that I'm thankful for. The reason I do this is because I'm not naturally a thankful person. I'm naturally a critical perfectionist. So my more natural inner dialogue is how things are not good enough. So thankfulness is something I must do because God commands that I do it, but it is a very weak area in me. Regular exercise is also something I'm not that good at doing. Neither is listening prayer because I find it challenging to carve out time and space for it. So I need to keep these things because I'm not good at them.

How might this work out for you? Let's say that a weak area for you is gossip. In that case, I think what's helpful is if you were to set aside some time, maybe weekly or monthly, where you practice the spiritual discipline of silence, and maybe solitude, for one of your meals or something. The point of silence and/or

solitude is to become more aware of God's presence and His friendship. When you are tempted to get attention by sharing something juicy, you practice with God in private just receiving His attention, so that when you are in the midst of a conversation with people, you're better trained to sense God in that moment.

Or, if you notice that you have a consumeristic attitude towards life where you use shopping as a distraction, or food, or video games, or watching the stock market, you might want to practice the spiritual discipline of fasting from that thing. If you have a difficulty with pornography, you may want to take a fast from certain media, like the internet. And during those times, spend some of that time in prayer with Jesus. Ask him, 'How can I be more aware of your presence when I'm in other situations, like the grocery store checkout line where you're confronted with soft porn, or with other people who have a consumeristic attitude towards the city?'

In Old Testament Israel, God gave Israel the Passover holiday, commemorating their 'July 4th Independence Day' – God's deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. They were remembering their deliverance out of slavery. Then Jesus put the Last Supper on top of the Passover anniversary. So whenever we do communion, we are remembering our deliverance out of sin. Even if you are going through a longer process of struggle, the truth is that God has delivered you from sin because he has delivered the humanity of Jesus out of fallen sinful flesh into new resurrection life, and Jesus has shared the Spirit of his new humanity with us. So the truth is that at the very core of our being, we are free, we are new, we are who God truly wants us to be. That is the reminder that God gives us through the rhythm that helps us remember it.

Doing Things That Give Me Rest and Life

And then, what are the things that bring you life, that help you recharge and feel rested? Obviously, I am married and have kids, and this has an impact on me. When I was single, I would spend 2 – 3 hours every day intensively studying Scripture or issues relating to church history or theology. That's what really helps me experience God – the development of my mind. So I do in depth Bible study on a weekly basis rather than a daily basis because daily isn't a realistic goal for me to have. But it's here because this is the most life-giving aspect of my relationship with Jesus. I enjoy learning with him and learning things so that I can articulate things better. So you need to keep life-giving activities in here.

This matches up with the Sabbath. In the creation, God set humanity in a garden to work in the garden, bringing forth beauty and order and life. But every seventh day, we were supposed to rest with God, to enjoy Him, to acknowledge the fact that God sat on his throne over a completed work.

Doing Things That Hone My Skills

Then there are things I do for the sake of growth in Jesus' mission. I'm learning Haitian Creole, because at one point, I felt like God told me to do it. My neighborhood has lots of Haitian people. So this is how Jesus' mission works out in my context. Also, I just added as a regular monthly discipline looking at our family's expenses and budget, and learning about an organization working in the field of global poverty. The reason for this is that Jesus calls us to care for the poor with our money.

So are there special things that are going on in the lives of people around you? How is Jesus calling you to learn more about those people or those issues? Is there some aspect of their culture you want to learn? Is there some way you just want to pray for them?

In the New Testament, this isn't so much an issue of repetition as it is a pattern. Jesus took his disciples to the east side and west side of the Sea of Galilee, because the Gentiles lived on the east side and the Jews lived on the west side. He taught them how to do cross-cultural ministry. Galilee was a microcosm of the whole world. When he was raised from the dead, he met them in Galilee so he could commission them and remind them that he was sending them to the whole world. When they looked back on how Jesus prepared them for this mission, they would look back on that time. Not to mention the times Jesus took them between Galilee and Jerusalem, between the margins and the center of Jewish life, and then to Samaria, the home of the half-Jewish half-Assyrian heretics the Samaritans. Then in Acts 1:8, Jesus said to them, 'You will be my witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.' The concentric circles just kept getting bigger and bigger. They were supposed to learn new cultures in order to present the message of Jesus to people. The great missionary Paul said, 'For though I am free from all, I have made myself a

slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I become as a Jew, that I might win the Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.’ (1 Cor.9:19 – 22) That means that we are continuously learning about the huge world that God loves and into which He sends us by the Spirit of Jesus. So again, what is on your plate to learn?

Finding a Rhythm of Life

Here is a very incomplete list of spiritual disciplines. I took the list from Adele Calhoun’s book *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*. This is not how she groups them; it’s more how I group them in my mind.

<i>Disengagement</i>	<i>Engagement</i>
Secrecy	Encouragement
Silence	Worship, Confession, Grieving
Solitude	Hospitality
Fasting from food	Celebration, Gratitude
Fasting from media	Study of Scripture
Sabbath Rest	Service
Simplicity	Generosity

Let me say a few things about the spirit with which you can do this. First, a rhythm of life like this is not intended to be forever. It is intended to be for a season. In preparing for this time, I reviewed my last revision, and realized that I wanted to add a few things. I added ‘write John and Zoe a note’ weekly because Zoe especially has gift giving as her language of love, and I’ve written her notes a couple of times before, and she lights up when that happens. But I realized that I want to do that for both of them, but especially for Zoe, more often. Now, I don’t think that will be for forever.

Also, this is not behavior modification. Spiritual disciplines are not ends in themselves. It’s not that you practice silence in order to be more silent per se. It is a training program that helps us build space into our lives so we can better experience Jesus and be better equipped for real life situations where deeper spiritual character is demanded of us. If you are not a Christian, and you’re wondering how to take all this, and whether any of this would make a difference to exploring Jesus, I would say absolutely. Part of the reason we don’t often understand our own need for Jesus is because we don’t understand our own sin – our self-centered resistance. If you’re not convinced about your own sin, then practice simplicity and generosity. In a materialistic, hedonistic culture like ours, it is hard. But Jesus calls us to do it anyway. When I do these things, I notice the resistance that is in me to monitoring my own spending, to giving more money away, to staying aware of what ways there are to give, to attitudes in me that say that my money is mine alone. Or, as you read what Jesus calls us to, and something strikes you as particularly challenging, say forgiveness, or loving your enemies, then pray about that regularly.

I’m going to give you a couple of minutes in silence to think and pray about this. For some of you, you may have done things like this before. For others of you, this may be brand new. In either case, or whether you’re somewhere in between, take these next few minutes to evaluate the mission of Jesus to the world, and what spiritual disciplines would help you right now. A few minutes like this is not enough time, but it represents a start. Then, after those few minutes, I’m going to let you turn to someone else – if you’re married it would be good to talk to your spouse – or maybe a small group of people, and share what you think is your next step.