

Spiritual Disciplines – Bible Knowledge and Application

The spiritual disciplines are an important aspect of discipleship. These are the skills and methodologies that bring about faith and behavioral maturity, and which, in combination with God's Spirit provide the experiential basis of wisdom. The specific number and list of Spiritual disciplines are not held in full agreement by Christians or Jews. But several commonly appear on most lists. The group of disciplines being proposed here is a composite taken from several sources. The disciplines are:

1. Bible Knowledge and Application
2. Public Worship and Ritual
3. Prayer in Private
4. Fasting and Self Limitation
5. Stewardships
6. Fellowship (One Anothering)
7. Being a Witness

There is overlap in these disciplines and others might include worship, prayer and fasting into a single category. I have separated these categories in this manner because they can be understood in relationship to individual, family and congregational discipleship more easily as listed.

Each discipline involves a series of skills or methods which, like exercise, builds up the disciple in faith and obedience related to God. As a child learns to roll over, and then crawl, then walk and finally run, so a disciple will develop each of these skills in a general developmental sequence but will still use earlier aspects at varying degrees even when mature. What follows is not an exhaustive or even best way to proceed. It is a simple, systematic and foundational approach that will help one understand the process. It can be adapted as needed by the individual, family or congregation.

Bible Knowledge and Application

For Jews and Christians, the Scriptures are the primary foundation of our knowledge of God, His purpose, and His will. So a major spiritual discipline is the gaining of knowledge of the Bible and the struggle to understand and obey. Knowledge and application are distinct but not separate aspects of this discipline. Application becomes faulty without a familiarity with the Bible. And much of the Bible can only be understood by doing it. Therefore, this discipline involves an increasing familiarization with the Bible, and a constantly improving obedience based on better understanding of scripture based on the experience of living it.

It is beyond the scope of this writing to explain how we got the Bible and why it can be trusted. Dr. Lewis and I have addressed that in more detail in our text *The Integration of*

Behavioral Science and Theology. For our purposes here, we will take the Bible as the revelation from God given to us in a time, linguistic and cultural context that has a universal message to the Jew first, then the Gentile who fears God, and ultimately to all peoples who will listen to its message. Its original form was in Hebrew and Greek, and over the centuries has been translated into Latin and English and in more recently nearing every language known to man. For most readers of this book, the Bible they will know is an English translation. So this will be our starting place for this discipline.

Selecting a Bible

Selecting an English Bible can be a difficult problem. There are an ever increasing number of bibles on the market. Some are traditional translations and others are popular restatements, and still others are specialized in some way. Some Bibles are text only, some have various helps, and still others are study Bibles with commentary or notes throughout the text.

For the most part, English Bibles come in three categories related to the translation process. There are word for word translations. These Bibles are an attempt to give an accurate English word for every Hebrew or Greek word from the original languages. Then there are dynamic equivalent translations which try to give the impact of the original languages in the context of English. These are often more readable and make it easier to follow the overall story of the text. But they can also introduce clarity that is not consistent with the original intent of the Biblical authors. Then there are many Bibles that are a paraphrase or commentary type of translation. Translation is probably a bad term for these. They are “in other words” Bibles. They do not attempt to translate as much as they try to tell the story in a way that their target audience can hear it. For the purpose of Bible knowledge and application, it is best to have a more literal Bible for study. I usually recommend that believers have several Bibles and use them as appropriate for their purpose. But for study and application, a Bible with a good word for word text is the best.

Another issue related to a good Bible is the text from which it was translated. The Bible comes to us through a vast collection of manuscripts, quotes, variants, translations and fragments. The discipline that addresses this process is called textual criticism. Two serious questions are found in this area of study. When variations of a Biblical text exist, which do you use? And, when some manuscripts have a verse and others do not, do you include it or not? The first question is often answered by an investigation of the sources and the likelihood of one giving rise to the other. The second question is as difficult. Do we add to the Word of God by including the extra verse? Or, do we take away from the word of God by not added the missing verse? In most cases a Bible translation follows one of two philosophies. The first group generally includes the extra verses and attempts to keep from losing verses. The King James Version and related Bibles follow this approach. The second group leaves them out in order to avoid later additions to the Bible from its original form. Most modern translations follow this approach. For the beginning student of the Bible in English, I suggest having a representative Bible of each type

which uses a word for word translation. For example, purchase a New King James Bible (fuller text) and a New American Standard Bible (limited text). By comparison reading, a beginner can at least form appropriate questions to address with their pastor or Bible teacher related to these variants in the text. Stay away from study Bibles if you are new to the faith. It is too easy to confuse the Biblical text with the notes and confuse human commentary with Biblical truth.

Becoming Familiar with the Bible

The Bible is a set of books. The Christian Bible has two major sections called the Old Testament and the New Testament. Each of these testaments is a collection of books of various types. The chart below can help with the basic taxonomy as used by Jews and Christians.

OLD TESTAMENT

Torah (Five Books of Moses)
Prophets (Narratives and sermons)
Writings (Worship and Wisdom books)

NEW TESTAMENT

Gospels (Accounts of Jesus)
Epistles (letters to congregations)
Revelation (Prophetic Vision)

Each section is important. But they must be read, studied and understood in different ways because they are different in style and intent.

The **Torah** is the foundation of all scripture. It must be viewed as the beginning place of all knowledge and study of the Bible. It gives the basic story of Creation and what went wrong. It tells of God's selection and promises to one man (Abraham) through which God would bless the whole world. It tells of God's selection of Abraham and his seed (both a people and a promised one) who would come after him. It tells of the origins of the nation of Israel, their captivity in Egypt and the deliverance by God under Moses, and their entry into the Land of Promise (the Holy Land). It describes the Tabernacle (prototype of the Temples) and the Levitical priesthood with its worship and sacrifice system, including holy days, which demonstrate God's purpose and work. It contains the Two Great Commandments (Love God and Love your Neighbor), the Ten Commandments, and the 613 commandments of Holiness and Goodness by which God's people Israel would serve as a Light to the Nations and repair the world under God's reign until the Messiah would bring the whole of God's Kingdom to earth.

Built upon the Torah, the **Prophets** continue the story of the development of Israel as a nation in the Promised Land and their struggle to follow God's plan and will for them. The uniting of the tribes into a Kingdom and the subsequent division into two nations (Israel and Judah) is chronicled by the narratives and sermons of a series of prophets sent by God to remind His people that they were His possession and that he would bless their obedience to the Torah and curse their disobedience.

The **Writings** complete the Hebrew Bible with books that provide answers to life's serious questions. Why is there evil? Why does it happen to good men? How can one live wisely? How does one pray? These books are the wisdom of God given in poetic and narrative form and are sometimes called the wisdom literature.

Firmly standing on the Foundation of the Torah, the corrections of the prophets, and the wisdom of the writings, the **Gospels** (accounts of Jesus) make the claim that Jesus (Yeshua) is the Promised one (Messiah) who was sent by God to fulfill all that is written in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, and to establish in His person, ministry and life, the New Covenant based on Jeremiah 31:31ff. These Gospels are the "Good News", that all that God promised toward a complete reconciliation of the Creation to Himself was beginning and would include both Israel (a remnant and then all Israel), and also include a large number of Gentiles from every nation, tribe and tongue. This reconciliation foretold by the Prophets would reconcile man and God, Jew and Gentile, God and His creation, and heaven and earth so that God's glory would be manifest in all of His works. The Gospels also focused on a problematic series of events that would amaze and confuse many. This Jesus would die as a rejected and cursed man, be buried and rise again from the dead. He would establish a discipleship system that would reach all nations beginning with Israel, and then he would return to heaven until the time of the restoration of all things. The book of Acts (Luke II) would tell the story of this discipleship system as it impacted Jews, then God-fearing Greeks and Romans, and ultimately complete pagan Gentiles of the Roman Empire.

The **Epistles** are letters to congregations and individuals who formed those first communities (congregations) who were attempting to live in this present age but who now belonged to the Kingdom of God, both spiritually present and yet promised to come. Theology and practical living instruction as part of this kingdom and community are woven together in the epistles so that believers can be in this world but not of it, while waiting for the Lord to return to establish the complete reconciliation of the New Covenant.

The Book of **Revelation**, in a style similar to the Old Testament Prophetic books (like Daniel and Ezekiel) gives a symbolic and comprehensive (though not always comprehensible) vision of the events of the end times when the complete end of the present age and beginning of the full eternal future will take place. There will be a battle between God and evil in heavenly and earth. The wicked will be destroyed and judged and the righteous will be vindicated and rewarded. Then as promised, a New Heaven, a New Earth, and a New Jerusalem in an eternal New Covenant will replace all of the former and temporal things of the past.

Hearing and Doing God's Word

Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of the Messiah (Rom. 10:17). This passage addresses an important aspect of faith. Faith is a response to God's Word. Without the word, we have only assumption. But God, through His Word gives us certain

and sure promises, which can be trusted. This trusting is faith. Faith is believing in God's Word of promise. This was true for Abraham who *believed in the Lord and He reckoned it as righteousness* (Gen. 15:6). And it is true for us. But faith trusts to the point of obedience. Abraham not only believed in the Lord, but he obeyed Him. James admonishes us to do the same by stating *prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves* (James 1:22). It is true that a new Christian will know very little of the word. But it is not true that one can be a mature believer and be ignorant of or disobedient to the word. So the first discipline is that we become familiar with and obedient to the word.

The skills of Bible reading, memorizing and application are the subject of many books and sermons throughout church history. What follows will be a description of the levels of development of this skill and by no means an exhaustive list of how to proceed. The levels of knowledge and application are:

1. Familiarization with the Bible
 - a. General familiarization of the Biblical Story.
 - b. Significant detail of the Biblical Story.
 - c. Awareness of significant passages.
 - d. Memorization of the Biblical Story and significant texts.
2. Application
 - a. General obedience to important commandments
 - b. Specific obedience to important commandments
 - c. Obedience to smaller commandments
 - d. Implicational thinking and obedience to Biblical principles
 - e. Stewardship in obedience.

Becoming familiar with the Bible involves long periods of **reading it over and over**. This should be done with a readable text and during periods when one can be alert. One approach is to read the entire Torah (Gen. – Deut.) in a year. This is done in every synagogue and by many Christians. The Torah should be understood first because it sets the foundations for all other Scripture. On opposite years, the Gospels (Matt-Acts) should be read. These books are the foundation of the New Testament. A solid knowledge of Torah and Gospel is essential to spiritual growth. Too often, Christians are drawn into prophesy and subjects from the epistles with little or no background for understanding the context of those issues. The Story of Abraham, the Exodus, and the Tabernacle are all significant in understanding the Gospels. Both the Torah and Gospels are critical for understanding the Letter to the Romans or those to the Corinthians. Reading over and over provides an opportunity to get the general story in mind.

Reading aloud is also very important. If you read the Bible out loud you both hear it and see it. This will increase memory and understanding. Silent reading will not bring the same results. Reading a significant text aloud for several days will bring it into memory and lock the context into your mind. You cannot go very far in obedience if you do not

know the word. If possible, get the Bible on tape and listen to it over and over. The more ways you get the word into you, the better.

One method of getting the word into you and becoming familiar with it is to **write your own copy of the Bible**. God required the king of Israel to do this very thing. He was to write a copy of the Torah and read it every day of his life (Deut. 17:18-20). When I was seventeen years old, I wrote the complete New Testament and large portions of the Old Testament in three ring binders. My knowledge of the Bible and memory of context has not been surpassed by any other method of study. Reading and memorization is critical to spiritual growth and establishes a foundation for obedience.

The content of Bible knowledge should be the general story of God's creation, the fall and His plan of redemption and reconciliation through the nation of Israel and the Messiah. It should include the bringing in of the Gentiles and the ultimate culmination of all that God has promised. And finally, it should include the New heaven and new Earth, judgment and the establishment of the eternal state. There is much to learn, memorize and understand. But understanding will not come without obedience. So, we turn to application.

Obedience involves a basic understanding of what God has commanded. And with obedience comes greater understanding of why God has commanded certain behaviors. It is clear from the Bible that there are certain commands that are general and priority to obedience. For example, in both Judaism and Christianity two major commands take precedence. The first is to *Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might* (Deut 6:5). The second is to *Love your neighbor as yourself* (Lev. 19:18). Jesus teaches that all the law and prophets depend on these two commandments (Matt. 22:40). How do we do these two commands? We do them by finding the specifics of each in the other commandments. For example, the Ten Commandments are details of how to love God (1-5), and how to love our neighbor (6-10). In the detailed commandments we get additional understanding. In minor commandments, we get very specific details that can assist with understanding the general principle of the larger commandment. For example, Deuteronomy 22:8 requires that any new house have a parapet (a small wall) on the roof. If we built a small wall on our roofs today as a religious symbol, we would be thought of as fools. But ancient roofs were used as patios. God required that a wall be placed there to protect your neighbor and his children from falling off. Certainly the principle of putting a protecting wall around a pool would be a modern application of this commandment.

Growing in our understanding of God's word and our obedience to His commands is an important discipline. As we learn the major and minor commands we begin to think in terms of holiness and goodness. As time goes on, we are able to apply those concepts to new situations where a command has not been given. This maturity is important and commended as we become stewards of this life before God. Paul used this wisdom as he explained that while something might be lawful for him, it was not expedient to do it (I Cor. 6:12). Also, the writer to the Hebrews suggested that with obedience we train our senses to know good and evil (Heb. 5:14).

Advanced study of the Bible will involve more than reading, memorizing and application. It involves some level of scholarship. This may include some basic knowledge of the Biblical languages, church history, systematic theology and Biblical interpretation approaches. This will also involve Bible studies, sermons and conferences where skilled and mature teachers assist in the understanding and application of God's word. As a believer moves toward a greater knowledge of the word, the basic skills will continue and additional resources will be sought.

One area of importance is the issue of the Biblical languages. Bible translations were discussed earlier, but it is important to understand that Bible translations alone limit one's knowledge of the full meaning of the texts. Knowing the language and their cultural context is an important part of Biblical interpretation. This skill can also be developed in a progression. The basic stages are:

1. Learning the alphabet of the language.
2. Word studies
3. Grammar and syntax
4. Reading and translating

It is possible to get some minimal language benefit from the basic numbering system used by the Strong's concordance. Even many pastors use this system. But a serious study of and use of the languages should involve learning the alphabet. There are many language helps that can be accessed if the Hebrew or Greek alphabets are known. Those who learn the Hebrew alphabet will have access to the Hebrew Bible and helps from Judaism. Those learning the Greek alphabet will have access to sources related to the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible used by Jesus and the disciples) and the New Testament. Word studies are easier because by using the alphabet reference books that do not contain the Strong's numbering system are readily accessible. Word studies can be a rich source of understanding larger Biblical concepts like faith and love, as well as understanding the reason why translators used different English words for the same original word as they often do.

Grammar and syntax helps in understanding the linguistic context of the verses being studied. Language has rules and many people violate those rules by just locking onto a word and a single definition. A word only has meaning in context. Finally, as one's vocabulary and understanding of the original languages increases, it becomes easier to see that even the best English translation may miss word plays and rich turns of a phrase. A believer who uses language studies will find them invaluable.

Resources for this Discipline

Every spiritual discipline has specialized items that assist in its development in the life of the believer. We have already addressed the need for a solid Bible translation and perhaps

a good reading Bible. Other Bible helps can be useful in Bible familiarization and application. This may involve a basic or intermediate personal library. As a believer becomes

The following list of books is recommended for basic Discipleship.

Starter Kit

New American Standard Bible
NASB Exhaustive Concordance
Bible Handbook
Moody Handbook of Theology

Basic Library

New American Standard Bible	New King James Bible
NASB Exhaustive Concordance	Strong's Exhaustive Concordance
Bible Handbook	(NKJV)
Moody Handbook of Theology	Pictorial Bible Dictionary
	Systematic Theology

Extended Basic Library (Include Basic Library)

Thayer's Greek Lexicon (with Strong's numbers)
Brown Driver Brigg's Hebrew Lexicon (with Strong's numbers)
Schaff's History of the Christian Church (8 vols)
Zondervan's Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia (5 vols)
Introduction to Judaism (any basic intro will work)
Complete Book of Jewish Observance or Jewish Home Advisor
The Expositor's Bible Commentary (10 vols)

Advanced Library (Include Basic and Extended Basic Library)

Multi-Translation Comparative Text Bible
Interlinear Hebrew – English Tenach and Interlinear (Greek – English) New Testament
Introduction to N.T. Greek grammar and Introduction to Basic Hebrew
Jewish Siddur (Prayer Book) and Messianic Jewish Siddur and Book of Common Prayer
Hymnal (Your Denomination)
Chumash (Torah with Rabbinic Commentary – Hebrew and English)
Mishnah (in English)
Schaff's Creeds of the Christian Church (3 vols) and a specific Church History based on your own Denomination
Additional Systematic Theology sets

Additional Commentaries or sets (as needed)
Subject texts (as needed)

Some of the books recommended are related to other disciplines but are given here to show what a basic personal library might include. This is not an exhaustive list but does begin to give a disciple a good foundation of materials. For those who are computer literate, there are several very good programs that provide this basic library and much more a click of a mouse. There really is not excuse for ignorance of God's word among Christians. Only our laziness or apathy keeps us from a foundational knowledge of the word.

** This article is taken in part from the book *Development and Discipleship* by Nathan Lewis and H. Bruce Stokes.*