

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

¹⁹ **By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.'** Genesis 3:19

In the book of Genesis chapter 3 we are informed of the fall of man which brought about man's separation or alienation from God, which lead to alienation from each other as well.

There is the view that human beings would not have lived forever had man and woman, had they not eaten of the forbidden fruit. The temptation was that if they ate they would be like God, the serpent beguiled them so they did eat. Rather the implication is that human beings would have regarded death not as the last fearful frustration but as their natural end. The fear of death and their distorted relationship with God and one another are considered to be as a result of their disobedience. Therefore, they are no longer characterized by a shared concern for each other, in other words there are occasions when human beings do not show compassion for each other, but domination, control and power. However, human beings, aware of their need for relationships, attempt to compel others to fill their need that they may be secure. Although such security is uncertain and only for a time. For they are always haunted by the fear that those whom they dominate will free themselves. Thus they try to get rid of this fear by further aggression, hostility and belligerence. This too may be successful for a while. From the fear of death, however, they cannot escape. For in the

depths of their soul they know that the structure of relationships which they have created to protect themselves is essentially without substance. In the end it will crumble and they will be compelled to face the truth which they had always tried to deny- that they are human and not God. Our disordered relationships and our fear of death are intimately bound up together, they are as a result of our yielding to the temptation to put ourselves in the place of God, which results in alienation from God and each other.

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Here in the book of Genesis we are reminded that we are creatures and how important it is for us to be conscious of this truth, to be conscious of our mortality, our human frailty and the shortness and uncertainty of human life. When we fail to acknowledge this truth we distort who we are and by extension our relationship with God and each other, and the fear of death steers us in the face.

There is hope, my brothers and sisters in Christ because there is God. Who sent his Son Jesus Christ to redeem and to save.

Spiritual disciplines help to keep our relationship with God in good working order, and even help develop intimacy. But no discipline is able to create or start our relationship with God. Nothing we do can do that; Christ did it already. In the gospel according to John Jesus says ¹⁶You 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.

No discipline gives us even the briefest moment of escape from our broken nature. No discipline can make us more valuable as persons, or make us inherently more of a leader. Our life may go smoother because of it, but it may get much rougher, and neither is really the point of it.

Disciplines and practices are tools that are a part of cooperating with the Spirit on the task of remaking us into what God wants us to be. Tools, not magic, not willpower. Tools of submission and transformation. Tools that are used with Scripture, not in its stead. Powerful tools, only because we are working with God who is all powerful. Remember it is God who initiates the process and who determines its outcome, to receive the benefits of any spiritual discipline or practice we are called to cooperate with God.

One reason for practicing spiritual disciplines is to eliminate the things that keep us from experiencing the fullness of life in God. Through this practice of spiritual discipline, God can break our bondage to satisfying ourselves and reveal the things that control us. Thus allowing us to ask God to help us remove them so we can acknowledge the sovereignty of God, and willingly submit ourselves to Him in loving obedience.

Spiritual disciplines are means through which our relationship with God and each other are strengthened by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

In John 15: 4-7 Jesus states: ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

And in: John 6:53 -57 So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and

I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

It is traditional Christian disciplines and practices like Ash-Wednesday and Lent that keeps us rooted and grounded in Holiness of life and Godly-passion. They help us to make right choices, to acknowledge our sins and shortcomings, to seek pardon and forgiveness and to lift up others when they are down. Thus enabling us to live together in community in harmony, fellowship, tolerance, respect for the other, love and peace.

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It is important for us to be very conscious of our mortality and the importance of spiritual disciplines which by the grace of God enables us to strengthen and deepen our relationship with God and each other.

As we reflect on spiritual disciplines and rituals. There is the view that seemingly some people particularly children may or do not take spiritual disciplines seriously enough, or they do not understand their significance. We are to leave it to God. We do not know or we may never know what effect such disciplines may have on the lives of people. It is our responsibility to provide the opportunity for people to engage in and experience spiritual disciplines and leave the rest to God.

There is a young man who got into trouble and was arrested and charged. While in prison he asked for a particular priest, so the prisoner officers contacted the priest by telephone and informed him that there was a young man in prison who was asking for him. The young man said to the priest, I am in prison, father, I am in trouble and I need you. I remember

when I was a child every Ash Wednesday you had a service in the Church for the School children and you used to put ashes on our foreheads and say “Remember you are Dust and to Dust you shall Return.” I need you father to pray for me and help me.

In a moment of confinement, isolation and alienation the effects of the spiritual discipline surfaced in the young man. It allowed him to recognize that he had distorted his relationship with God and his neighbor. So he yearned for the spiritual discipline, which, by the grace of God, can restore his relationship with God and his neighbor.

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As human beings may we take our mortality seriously, for we all have our weaknesses, our failures and our sins. Our acknowledgement of our humanness, our mortality, our love of God and our engagement in spiritual disciplines by the grace of God will enable us to wholeheartedly live holy and meaningful lives and help others to do the same.

I invite you to observe a Holy Lent by participating in the Spiritual Disciplines offered in your Parish/Church and privately- alone or with your home/family/neighbor.

Prepared by C. Leopold Friday

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