

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster

Session 1: Chapters 1-2

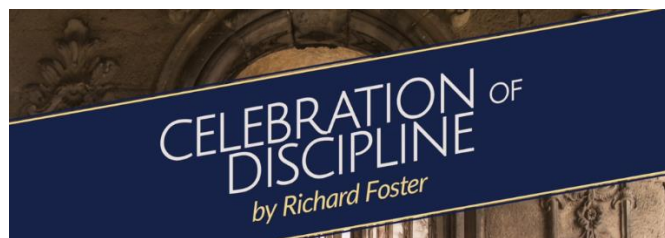
June 5, 2023

Father Jonathan Bailes

Assigned Reading:

Chapter 1: "The Spiritual Disciplines: Door to Liberation"

Chapter 2: "The Discipline of Meditation"



Lesson Summary: *We begin our study of Richard Foster's Celebration of Discipline by paying attention to the important truth that he emphasizes in his introduction, which is that the disciplines that he discusses in this book are not a program for self-improvement or a means for us to take control of our own spiritual growth. To the contrary, the spiritual disciplines are simply a way for us to make ourselves available to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. And in this session, we discuss the first of those spiritual disciplines, the discipline of meditation, which is the "ability to hear God's voice and obey his word."*

Richard Foster begins his book "Celebration of Discipline" with something of a lament about the shallow state of the spiritual life of many Christians today. Superficiality, he says in his opening sentence, is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem.

“

The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.

CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE (P. 1)

I don't know about you, but when I read those words, I found myself agreeing with him. Not because of the shallowness I see in other people's spiritual lives, but because of just how shallow and superficial my own life in Christ often feels. When I read what he was saying, I found myself saying, Amen! That's what I want! I want to be a person of depth.

And I imagine that's probably how you feel as well. Because most of us don't want to be shallow. We don't want to be superficial Christians. Have you ever heard that saying that the church today is a thousand miles wide and an inch deep? It's been repeated by multiple people and there's a lot of truth to it. But it's not something that we're proud

of. I don't want to be an inch deep, and I'm sure you don't either.

The question is, what can we do about it? Well, according to Richard Foster, we often go about addressing this problem the wrong way.

“

We rely on our willpower and determination. Whatever may be the issue for us—anger, fear, bitterness, gluttony, pride, lust, substance abuse—we determine never to do it again; we pray against it, fight against it, set our will against it. But the struggle is all in vain ...

CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE (P. 4)

Just think about all the times when you've been sitting in church or praying or talking to a fellow Christian and you've been convicted about something. Either something you've been doing or something that you realize that you should be doing that you're not. And you think to yourself - that's it, it's time to change. I'm tired of not being the Christian I should be. From now on, I'm going to be a serious follower of Jesus. And in the moment, you really mean it. But somehow, despite how sincere you are, nothing really changes. You continue to fall into the same bad habits and your prayer life remains thin and you find yourself no further along the path of spiritual growth than you were before.

And that's because, as Foster says, determination is not enough. Willpower alone will do nothing to deepen your relationship with God. Because (and this is another thing I really appreciate about this book) as Foster says in his first chapter, inner righteousness is not something we can bring about through strenuous effort. It is a gift; a gift of God that must be graciously received.

“
The needed change within us is God's work, not ours ... We cannot attain or earn this righteousness of the kingdom of God; it is a grace that is given.

CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE (P. 7)

Now, maybe that sounds a bit strange in a book that's all about habits and disciplines that we can cultivate to develop our spiritual lives. If Richard Foster believes that inner change is God's work and not ours, then why did he write a book all about what you can do to cultivate certain disciplines? I think that's an important question.

Foster actually gives a clear and direct answer to it in his first chapter. All of these disciplines that he talks about in this book, they aren't some kind of therapeutic strategy or some self-help program. They're not methods for making yourself a better Christian. No, the purpose of all of these disciplines is simply to open yourself up, to make yourself available to the Spirit of God. God does the work. What we do with these disciplines is simply to allow him to do that work.

If you look at the table of contents, you'll notice that Richard Foster divides up these spiritual disciplines into three categories, which he calls the inward disciplines, the outward disciplines, and the corporate disciplines. Over the course of this study, we'll discuss each of these in turn. But before we do that, I wanted to make a couple introductory comments.

First, these videos are not meant as a substitute for actually reading the book. What I'm trying to do in these videos is highlight a couple of themes from

each chapter for discussion. But if you really want to get something out of this study, you really need to read the book as well.

The second - maybe this should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway. As with almost all books, there will be things that you will read that you heartily agree with and things you may read in this book with which you thoroughly disagree. And that's okay.

Speaking for myself, I tend to assume that I'll find myself disagreeing with at least something in almost every book I read. And this one is no different. Richard Foster is a theologian in the Quaker tradition. I'm an Anglican priest. For that reason, when I read him, I expect to disagree sometimes. But I also expect to learn and benefit from what he has to say. So I encourage you to read with the same mindset. Take seriously what he says. Think about how you can benefit from it, and don't be surprised if you occasionally disagree.

Okay, enough of that introduction. Let's talk about the first inward discipline: meditation.

The Discipline of Meditation

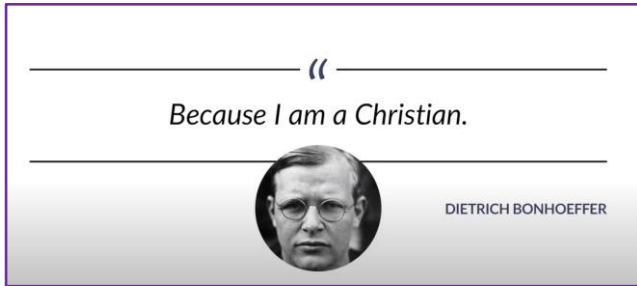
I'll be honest, meditation is not something that comes naturally to me. I don't like sitting somewhere quietly and I get easily distracted. But just because it's difficult to engage in meditation, it doesn't mean that I don't need to do it, that I somehow get a pass. To the contrary, it's an essential part of the Christian life. And that's not just Richard Foster talking. Foster quotes the great 17th century Anglican Divine, Jeremy Taylor, who says:

“
Meditation is the duty of all.



JEREMY TAYLOR

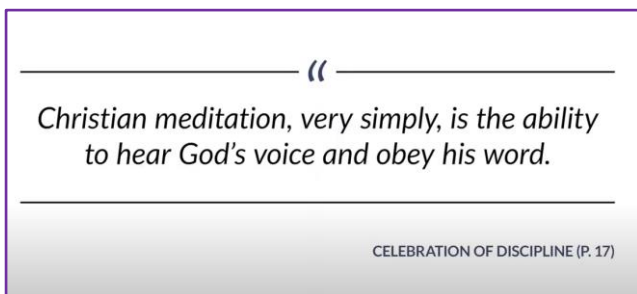
Then right after that, he mentions the famous German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, when he was once asked why he meditated, replied by simply saying:



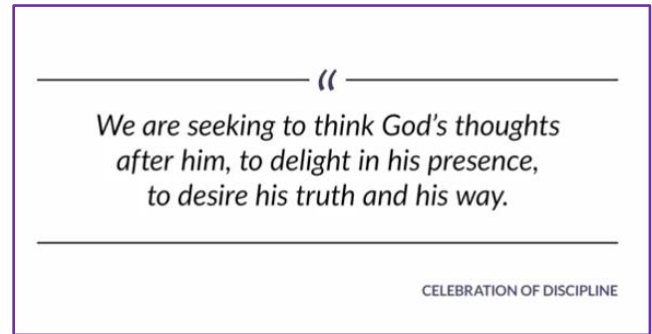
What's more, as Foster points out in the beginning of this chapter, the practice of meditation is something that is referenced and encouraged all throughout the Bible: from the Book of Genesis all the way through the New Testament. So it isn't something that's optional for Christians. It's not just for people who are into that sort of thing. It's a necessity.

But what does it really mean to meditate you might ask? It's something we should ask because, as Foster points out, there are lots of different understandings of this practice today. Lots of people talk about meditation, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're talking about what the Bible talks about or what Christians in the past have done.

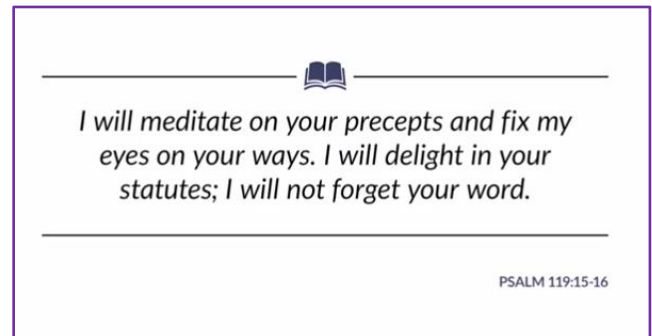
For instance, one of the common ways that people today think about meditation is that it's a practice of emptying the mind, of achieving some kind of mental and emotional tranquility or a state of mindfulness, as it's often called. That's different from the Christian discipline of meditation. Christian meditation isn't focused on emptying the mind, but filling it and focusing it, especially on Scripture. Here is Foster's basic definition of it:



That reminds me of one of my favorite Anglican prayers in the Book of Common Prayer. That prayer that talks about hearing, reading, learning, marking, and inwardly digesting the Word of God. That's what meditation is. It's the practice of reflecting and ruminating on and inwardly digesting God's fword. What we're doing when we meditate is, as Foster says:



It's like what the psalmist says in Psalm 119:



That kind of meditation is not optional for Christians, at least not if you want to be a Christian of any depth. But it's also not something that happens by accident. You have to be intentional. You have to set aside specific times, Foster says. You need to find a place that's quiet and not distracting. You need to adopt a posture that allows you to relax and to focus and to listen attentively to the voice of God.

Meditation, Jeremy Taylor says, is the duty of all. I want to be a Christian of depth. I don't want to be shallow, which means I need to meditate. And if you want to have depth in your spiritual life, then so do you.

Reading for the next session: Chapter 3 "Prayer"