



Intro to Spiritual Disciplines

Life...Motivation...Freedom

“The gold of Godliness isn’t found on the surface of Christianity. It has to be dug from the depths with the tools of the Disciplines. But for those who persevere, the treasures are more than worth the troubles.”

– Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*

“We have not advanced very far in our spiritual lives if we have not encountered the basic paradox of freedom...that we are most free when we are bound.”

Intro to Spiritual Disciplines: An Introduction to this Series...

A series written by Sara Norton

Spiritual Disciplines. We all know we should do them, but let's face it; they're never really that convenient or easy. Things such as fasting, praying, confession, Sabbath, solitude, evangelism, service, and worship don't always fit into our daily, jam-packed schedules, and they seem to have an aura of holiness about them that causes them to seem impossible to actually do on a consistent, regular basis. Simply put, spiritual disciplines have a reputation for being easier said than done.

If you're anything like me, you believe that because spiritual disciplines are hard for many adults to do, they would be near impossible for students to practice. However, **the spiritual disciplines aren't things to be saved until we reach a certain level of spiritual maturity. God gave us the disciplines as a means to become spiritually mature.** Our students are not only ready for them, but their souls are undoubtedly hungry for them.

But before our students begin living out the spiritual disciplines in practical ways, we need to help them take a look at what the disciplines are, why we engage with them, and how God desires us to do so. We often want to jump-in and start doing things when we first learn about them, but this series is intended to lay a firm foundation upon which students can build a lifestyle of discipline.

First, you and your students will take a look at how the spiritual disciplines aren't intended to be once-in-a-while actions, but they are meant to be a lifestyle. Secondly, you will look at the motivation God desires us to have as we engage with the spiritual disciplines. Finally, you will discuss the way God gave us the spiritual disciplines to bring true freedom into our lives.

The task of guiding your students in this initial series about spiritual disciplines will most certainly prove to be a discipline in and of itself! However, it is my hope and prayer that God will minister to you as you minister to them. Whether you have regularly engaged with spiritual disciplines or are about to embark on the journey for the first time, may you find yourself more fully aware of the fullness of life that is found in Christ at the end of this series.

Intro to Spiritual Disciplines: Life

Sara Norton's Blog (some thoughts to help you lead this conversation with your students)

When I was 3 years old, my parents enrolled me in gymnastics. I was a rather rambunctious child, and I am sure they were simply looking for a good alternative to help me harness all of my energy. I don't think they had any idea they were going to create a gymnast monster! **My childhood dream was to be an Olympic gymnast, and everything about my life was a reflection of the person I aspired to become.** I went to gymnastics practice every day for 2 hours, even though it took 45 minutes to get to the gym from my house. I practiced my beam routine on the square-row-patterns of the linoleum floor in our kitchen, and I was constantly getting in trouble for doing flips on my queen-sized bed. My mom was embarrassed to take me to the grocery store because I persistently did cartwheels up and down the aisles, and I would watch TV while doing the splits (probably a factor in my ability to still do them at 27!). Growing up, my heroes were the young ladies of the Women's Olympic team. I idolized Shannon Miller, knew the diet regimen of Dominique Moceanu, and hoped to one day break my ankle on a gold-medal-winning vault like Kerri Strug! I wanted to be a gymnast and everything about my life was spent training to become just that.

My experience of aspiring to be a famous Olympic gymnast isn't that uncommon, is it? Almost every child models their life after a particular celebrity, rock star, genius, or athlete. They have a dream of who they want to become, and they live their life mimicking the behaviors of their hero – fully believing that one day they will become just like them.

Yet something about this puzzles me. **What is it about us that thought we could become just like our childhood hero when we were growing up, but we often don't believe we can fully follow in Jesus' footsteps like He says we can?** Why did we have relentless faith that with enough training, we could become like those we looked up to; however, we waver in our faith that our lives could really reflect the life of our Savior? If your experience has been anything like mine, it's because we try to be like Jesus in an instant, and we get frustrated when we can't act like Him on demand. We try to be like Him without engaging in the necessary training, and we start to distrust that we can actually do what he asked of us when He said, "Follow Me."

Children who aspire to be professional basketball players don't give up after they miss a shot...or two...or three...or a hundred. Nor do professional basketball players hit a game winning shot at the buzzer because they stepped out on to the court for the first time and luck was on their side. Their abilities are a result of a lifestyle of training. Likewise, we can become like Jesus. However, it won't happen over night. It will happen as we arrange our lives around the activities Jesus himself practiced in order to remain in constant fellowship with the Father. It will happen as we "train ourselves to be godly" (1 Tim. 4:7), and let the spiritual disciplines be the way we live, not just something we do.

GOAL: (everyone's will be a little different, write yours here to remind you of what you are leading your group toward)

INTRODUCTION: Living out the spiritual disciplines is a hard thing to do! However, God doesn't ask us to do stuff that He knows we cannot do. We can become like Jesus, but it won't happen overnight. It will happen as we TRAIN ourselves to like Him.

PRAYER: God, we want to become like you. Give us the faith to believe that we can follow in your footsteps like you asked us to, and give us the strength to begin letting the spiritual disciplines be part of our lifestyle.

MEDIA/ACTIVITY/INTERACTION:

Watch "Be Like Mike" youtube video.

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0AGiq9j_Ak)

1. What did you want to be when you were little? Who did you model your life after?
2. What did you do to be like them?

Did you think you could be truly be like them if you just tried hard enough?

TRANSITION: What is it about us that thought we could become just like our childhood hero when we were growing up, but we often don't believe we can fully follow in Jesus' footsteps like He says we can? The good news is that we can like Jesus. However, it will take some training!

SCRIPTURE:

Read 1 Timothy 4:7-10

1. (Vs. 7) What does it mean to train ourselves to be Godly?
 - a. Have you ever practiced a Spiritual Discipline?
 - b. Was it easy, or did it feel like you were in training?
2. (Vs. 8) Do you believe this statement Paul makes?
 - a. What stands in the way of Godly training for you? How much time do you spend doing those things? (TV, extracurriculars, facebook, video games, etc.)
 - b. Note: Paul isn't saying physical training is bad. It does have benefits for the here and now. But our primary focus and efforts should be for eternity.
3. (Vs. 9) In this verse, Paul is reiterating the previous 2 sentences. It is like he is underlining them!
4. What is the relationship between where our hope is and our ability to be Godly?

Read Matthew 6:19-21

1. How does this teaching from Jesus relate to what Paul is saying?

TAKE AWAY: Becoming like Jesus doesn't happen over night. It happens as we daily train ourselves to be like him and let the spiritual disciplines be a life style.

1. What was challenging for you about the passage we read?
2. How can you give yourself more time for godly training?

CLOSING PRAYER: God, thank you for sending your Son to show us how to live. Help us to be disciplined to train to be like Him.

Intro to Spiritual Disciplines: Motivation

Sara Norton's Blog (some thoughts to help you lead this conversation with your students)

One of my favorite things to look at in a person's home is the door of their refrigerator. Although it seems silly, I believe you can tell a lot about a person depending on what they have on their refrigerator – upcoming plans they have, past events they've attended, newspaper clippings they are passionate about, pictures they cherish, things they have done that they are proud of. I recently went over to the home of one of our Life Group Leaders, and the door of her refrigerator was filled with school assignments and art projects her children had excelled at. This made me smile and also think back to the way **the refrigerator door was a motivating factor in the effort I put forth in elementary school**. I knew if I came home with a worksheet that said "Super" and had a smiley face sticker on it, it would make its way to refrigerator door and I would receive my parents' praise.

I bet most of you can say "Amen" to the motivating effects of the refrigerator door. From a young age, we are taught to expect praise when we do something well. When we put forth effort to accomplish a difficult task, we want others to know about it and praise us for it. While it is necessary for kids to receive praise and positive reinforcement for good behavior, God calls us to something higher as we mature in our walk with Him.

The Spiritual Disciplines are hard stuff. Not eating is hard. Taking the time to pray is hard. Confessing our failures is hard. Being still is hard. When we engage with the Spiritual Disciplines, it is tempting to want to share it with others so that we are praised for the hard work we put forth to grow deeper in our relationship with God. However, our motivation to engage with the Spiritual Disciplines shouldn't be focused on having our efforts hung up for all to see like on a refrigerator door. Instead, our motivation needs to reflect the motivation Jesus had to be disciplined – not centered on receiving the praise of others, but centered on remaining in constant, perfect relationship with the Father.

In Matthew 6:1, God tells us that our "acts of righteousness" should not be done so other people notice and then praise us for being a holy hero. Instead, our "acts of righteousness" are to be done in secrecy. They are to be experiences that are shared between ourselves and the Lord alone. Before we begin helping our students practically engage in spiritual disciplines, we need to help them have a pure heart in the reasons why they are engaging with them. So often students feel like a mere number in a sea of people and want to do anything to stand out of the crowd. However, in their walk as a Christ follower, humble obedience to God needs to be their focus (and our focus!). Guide them in a discussion about the necessity of having a pure, humble, and God-focused motivation when living a life of spiritual discipline.

GOAL: (everyone's will be a little different, write yours here to remind you of what you are leading your group toward)

INTRODUCTION: Tonight we'll be talking about having the right motivation when we do the spiritual disciplines.

PRAYER: God, thank you for knowing us better than we know ourselves. You understand our thoughts and see the motives of our hearts. Help us learn what it means to have the right motivation when doing the spiritual disciplines.

MEDIA/ACTIVITY/INTERACTION:

CEREAL SONGS. You will need a box of cereal, paper, and pens. Have students form pairs or trios, give each group a pen and paper, and hold up a box of cereal.

Say, "Here's the greatest box of cereal that ever existed! It is more delicious, and more nutritious, than any other box of cereal you've ever had! Your group's job is to write a commercial for this box of cereal. Make up your own tune, or choose a tune you already know and just change the words.

To sell your cereal, you'll need to let people know exactly what's in it. You'll need to come up with the ingredients and include those ingredients in your jingle. However, the ingredients need to be totally gross! (ie - "fortified with wet-sock juice concentrate"; "the dried tree fungus makes you strong!"). Have fun with your ingredients, but keep it clean - no bodily functions!"

Give students 5 minutes to create their song. Have each group perform their jingle, using the box of cereal as a prop.

After each group has performed, have them discuss the following questions with their group:

1. Do you look at the ingredients when you buy a box of cereal? Why or why not?
2. What is more important: what's on the outside of the box, or what's on the inside of the box? Why?

Open the box of cereal and let the students munch on it as you have them share their group answers and transition into tonight's Scripture lesson.

TRANSITION:

The spiritual disciplines aren't just about what's on the outside. Like the ingredients in a box of cereal, they're also about what's in the inside. The spiritual disciplines aren't just about *what* we do. They're also about *how* and *why* we do them. Our inner motivation is just as important as our outward actions.

SCRIPTURE:

Read Matthew 6:2-4, 5-6,16-18

1. What is a common thread between each of these passages?...*(Read Matthew 6:1)*
2. In verses 4, 6, and 18, Jesus talks about receiving a "reward" for doing different spiritual disciplines. What do you He means by a "reward"? What is the reward for doing spiritual disciplines?
3. What are some reasons why people would want others to see their "acts of righteousness"?
4. When have you been done something spiritual just so others would notice? (leaders, share a story from your own life!)
5. Has anyone ever done something for God that no one else has found out about? (You don't have to say what it is!) What was that like? What was the "reward" you received?

How can we know if we have the right motivation when we're doing the spiritual disciplines?

- What passages come to mind from the Bible?
- Read Galatians 5:22-23a...(our motivation is seen in the fruit we produce!)

TAKE AWAY:

There are a lot of spiritual disciplines: worship, giving, prayer, fasting, confession, Sabbath/rest, reading the Bible.

- What is the one you would most want someone to notice you doing? Why? What can you do to make sure you're not doing it just so other people notice and praise you?

CLOSING PRAYER: God, make us people who want to honor you with our lives. Help us to have right motives in the things we do that are seen by others, and the things we do that are only seen by You.

Intro to Spiritual Disciplines: Freedom

Sara Norton's Blog (some thoughts to help you lead this conversation with your students)

Let's face it. We live in a country of great wealth and freedom. We don't go to bed to the sound of gunfire; we have great schools and a government-protected right to become educated; we have fashionable clothes, iPods and iPhones, nice cars (even if gas is \$3.68 per gallon), and Starbucks lattes. We get to choose our jobs; we typically get paid more than a dollar per day; and we have a choice in who we marry! More often than not, we are used to getting what we want when we want it. **We live in America, *The Land of the Free*.**

As Americans, we typically think of freedom as something we're entitled to that gives us the right to do whatever we want with our lives. In his speech at the Democratic Convention, Barack Obama stated that he intends to win the presidential election to keep the promise of the United States Presidency alive—the promise that says “each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will.”

While I have no ill-will towards Barack, something stirred in me when he made this statement because it challenged what I believe about freedom in light of following Christ. When I look at Jesus' life, I don't see a man who “made of his own life what he willed”. Instead, I see a man who surrendered His will to the Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane. I listen to Him tell Peter that one day Peter would be led where he would rather not want to go. I hear Jesus ask me to take up my cross daily as I follow him.

To God, freedom isn't focused on “making of our own lives what we will.” It is focused on what God wills for our life. **Freedom doesn't reside in always getting to do what we want to do, but in always doing what God wants us to do.**

In Deuteronomy 30:11-20, God tells us we have the free will to decide whether or not we are going to follow the ways He has set before us that lead to life. Although the list of things God asks of us can seem daunting and restrictive at times, God doesn't ask us to do all of it to simply make our lives difficult. Instead, He asks us to do certain things and withhold ourselves from certain things because He knows that by doing so, we will experience the fullness of life He has created for us. He knows we will experience a life lived in constant connection and unbroken relationship with Him, and that is TRUE FREEDOM.

Spiritual disciplines can seem restrictive and burdensome. They don't always conveniently fit in the schedule we might have planned for our day. But God tells us that He wants nothing more for us than to “choose life” (Deut. 30:19), and He has given us the spiritual disciplines in order for us to experience true life and freedom. Tonight, let us remember God's goodness as we discuss the freedom the spiritual disciplines bring.

GOAL: (everyone's will be a little different, write yours here to remind you of what you are leading your group toward)

INTRODUCTION:

At times, the spiritual disciplines can seem restrictive and burdensome. But God has given them to us so that we may live a life of TRUE FREEDOM with Him.

PRAYER:

God, help us remember that everything you ask of us is for our good because You are good and want the best for us.

MEDIA/ACTIVITY/INTERACTION:

Watch "Freedom 101" youtube video.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDRA3XFfDr4>)

Put students in groups of 3-4 and ask them the following questions. (Have the groups share their answers after each question.)

1. At one point in time, JFK said that freedom is "the right to make our own decisions and determine our own destiny." Is that freedom? Why or why not?
2. What is your definition of freedom?
3. What things or experiences have played a role in forming your definition of freedom?

TRANSITION:

From an American perspective, freedom is seen as the right to do what we want when we want. However, God's perspective of freedom is a little different. God is more concerned with our true freedom than our temporary comfort. He might ask us to do things that seem inconvenient and burdensome, but everything He asks us to do (like the spiritual disciplines!) is so we can truly be free.

SCRIPTURE:

Tonight we're going to read Deuteronomy 30: 11-20, but before we do, let me give you a little context for this passage. This passage begins with the Lord saying, "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach." What God is saying is that He has just given the Israelites the ENTIRE Law. This means that God gave them the 10 commandments in chapter 5, and then spent the next 25 chapters filling them in on all the details of those 10 commandments! He has just asked a TON of them. Yet He says, "What I am commanding you today is not too difficult." If the Israelites were anything like me, I am sure they were thinking, "Yeah right, God. What you just asked of us is stinkin' impossible!" Let's read Deut. 30:11-20 right now to find out why God doesn't think what He is asking the Israelites to do is too difficult for them.

Read Deuteronomy 30:11-20

- Why do you think God doesn't think all His commands are too hard? (Because they lead to LIFE – vs. 16)
- Like the Israelites, God tells us things we cannot do and things we need to do (like the spiritual disciplines). Doesn't that make us slaves? How can we be told what to do, but still be free?
- (vs. 19-20) God makes our decision to follow Him seem pretty simple: choice life or choose death. Is it that easy? Why or why not?

Read Matthew 11:28-30; John 10:10

- What do these verses say about the things God asks us to do?

TAKE AWAY: Living out the spiritual disciplines won't always be easy. But what have you learned tonight about freedom that you can use to help you live out the spiritual disciplines even when they are hard to do?

CLOSING PRAYER: God, thank you that each of us has the chance to experience true freedom because we know who You are. Not everyone has the privilege of knowing that you are the way, the truth, and the life. Help us remember that everything you ask of us is because you want us to be in relationship with You and truly free.

