



ASH
WEDNESDAY

'Spiritual Disciplines' An Introduction To A Deeper Walk

James 4:1-9 & Matthew 6:16-21

5 March 2025 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Anglican Church of Paphos

Introduction

Ash Wednesday, as many of you will know, falls 40 Days before Good Friday and commemorates Jesus' forty days in the wilderness when, it seems to me, he shaped the vision for his ministry and mission through prayer and fasting. Ash Wednesday also marks the beginning of Lent.

The word Lent in Latin means 'spring' - the season of new life and of growth out of the darkness and dormancy of winter. Lent, for some, is a time for 'navel gazing' and truthful honesty about the state of their lives - both morally and ethically. For others, Lent provides a focus to practice some form of abstinence or to commit to a less indulgent lifestyle – especially after the excesses of the Christmas season. But for the Christian, Lent provides a welcome opportunity to nurture our spiritual lives.

1. A Deeper Walk

As most of you will know, we begin a Lent Course next Tuesday, 11 March entitled 'A Deeper Walk' - examining what are known as 'Spiritual Disciplines.' These practices serve as doorways through which we invite God to change our hearts and draw us closer to Him. As our reading from James 4:7-8a reminds us: *"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you ..."*

"Superficiality 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." Those words, first written by Richard Foster in 1978 (Celebration of Discipline) are as relevant today as they were then - if not more so.

In order to have a walk that is deeper on a spiritual level, we must engage in activities that bring about a spiritual focus which is in stark contrast, it seems to me, to the prevailing culture in the church today. Modern Christianity seems to say: "Be nice, Go to Church, Do the Right Thing." But many Christians end up feeling empty with that sort of advice because it makes faith superficial and shallow. It doesn't touch us on a deeper level, does it? We need to find spiritual fuel for our lives that reminds us that God is real. The goal of the Spiritual Disciplines, of course, is Spiritual Formation. The process of transforming our inward beings 'body, soul and spirit' in such a way that our life with God is lived outwardly and inwardly, freely and naturally.

Spiritual Formation means that we seek to form/shape our hearts and lives into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In essence, Spiritual Disciplines can be described as behaviours that facilitate spiritual growth. There are many to choose from, and include fasting and prayer, study and service, submission and solitude, confession and worship, meditation and silence, simplicity, frugality, secrecy, sacrifice, and celebration. Our Lent Course will be focussing on six of these: Prayer, Bible Study, Worship, Confession, Solitude, Simplicity and Confession. Leo Tolstoy once said: *"Everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself."*

The primary requirement for investing ourselves in the Disciplines, of course, is a longing after God. Psalm 42:1,2, 7 *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me."*

2. Struggles We Face

There are, however, several struggles we face with Spiritual Disciplines.

a. Ignorance. The Bible calls us to fasting, prayer, worship and celebration but gives us no instructions on how to do them. How many sermons have you heard on the importance of Simplicity or Solitude for example? These haven't always been topics of discussion in Christian circles, have they?

b. Putting The Disciplines Into Practice. Practicing the disciplines is not like a science project at school where you prove the outcome by demonstrating the process. The effects of the Disciplines are inward, spiritual and affect the heart.

c. Danger Of Turning The Disciplines Into Laws. Our Lent Course is not suggesting that those who do not practice the Disciplines are somehow not committed to Jesus. And I'm not suggesting that God will like us any better if we practice the Disciplines.

But the Disciplines do represent a search for intimacy with God - not a set of rules. *"It is not the spiritual disciplines per se that transform us into the likeness of Christ. Without the work of God's Spirit within, practices guarantee nothing."* (Adele Calhoun).

d. Seeking An Experience. I'm sure you'd all agree with me when I say that an experience with God is not to be refused. And, whilst we may not feel God's nearness at times, that doesn't mean He is not far away. I say that because feelings are a dangerous barometer of success or intimacy.

e. More Than Willpower. We need to grow beyond our dependence on willpower to overcome sin. *"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 and we find ourselves once again morally bankrupt or, worse yet ... proud of our external righteousness. Willpower will never succeed in dealing with the deeply ingrained habits of sin."* (Richard Foster).

3. Why Study the Disciplines?

Because these are some of the issues people have raised over the past year. I don't know how to pray or study the Bible. But Spiritual Disciplines are:

a. A Means Of Receiving Grace. *"God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us."* (Richard Foster).

Galatians 6:8: *"The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life"*
The Disciplines are a way of sowing to the Spirit ... getting us into the ground where God can work within us and transform us. As we place ourselves in them to seek communion with Christ, His grace flows to us and we are changed.

b. A Means Of Pursuing Godliness. 1 Timothy 4:7 *"...discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness..."*

c. A Greater Awareness Of The Idols Of Our Heart. *"Becoming aware of what is true and false about us is essential for spiritual growth, and it is not always comfortable."* (Adele Calhoun).

d. Jesus Expects Us To Seek Him. Matthew 11:29: *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."* (Adele Calhoun) *"Throughout the centuries the disciplines of prayer, confession, worship, stewardship, fellowship, service, attending to Scripture and the Lord's Supper have remained constant channels and disciplines of grace. These time-resilient disciplines give the church in every age and culture ways to keep company with Jesus."*

e. Jesus Modelled The Disciplines For Us. *"Jesus was the most disciplined Man who ever lived and yet the most joyful and passionately alive. He is our example of discipline."* (Donald Whitney)

Conclusion

Godliness isn't found on the surface of Christianity. It has to be dug from the depths with the tools of Spiritual Disciplines. In other words, we have to make the effort, both in study and application, to make them work. Each of us are responsible for our own discipleship. We can teach you, train you, walk with you but ... each of us are only as spiritual as we want to be.

In his Lenten sermon of 1979, Pope John Paul II said: *"Penance is not just an effort, a weight, it is also a joy. Sometimes it is a great joy of the human spirit, a delight that other sources cannot bring forth. Contemporary man seems to have lost, to some extent, the flavour of this joy. ... The whole period of Lent ... is a systematic call to this joy that comes from the effort of patiently finding oneself again. Let no one be afraid to undertake this effort."*

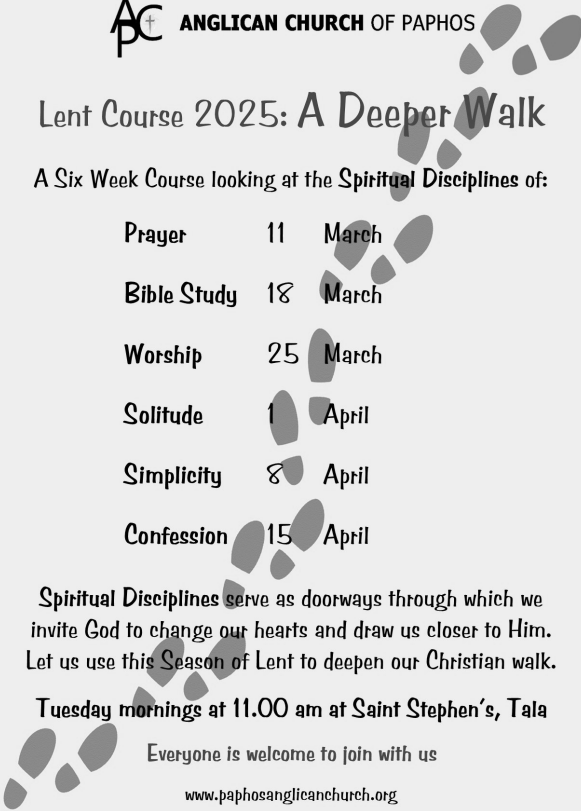
For the most part, the practicing of the disciplines will usually have two outcomes: 1) They can either bring consolation (a feeling of closeness with God); 2) or desolation (a feeling of God's absence).

However, let's not forget that God's Grace is unearned and unearnable, we are not trying to win God's love. We are simply putting ourselves in a place where God can change us (so that we can fulfil the potential God has created in us).

Matthew 6:19-21: *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroy and where thieves do not break in nor steal, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."*

Homework!

Start to read *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster!! You can download a FREE copy here <https://revpacman.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/richard-foster-celebration-of-discipline.pdf>

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AC **ANGLICAN CHURCH OF PAPHOS**

Lent Course 2025: A Deeper Walk

A Six Week Course looking at the **Spiritual Disciplines** of:

Prayer	11	March
Bible Study	18	March
Worship	25	March
Solitude	1	April
Simplicity	8	April
Confession	15	April

Spiritual Disciplines serve as doorways through which we invite God to change our hearts and draw us closer to Him. Let us use this Season of Lent to deepen our Christian walk.

Tuesday mornings at 11.00 am at Saint Stephen's, Tala

Everyone is welcome to join with us

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