



COVENANT UMC GUIDE TO LENT 2012

PRACTICING THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

By Pastor Valerie Sansing

So don't lose a minute in building on what you've been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. With these qualities active and growing in your lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus. Without these qualities you can't see what's right before you, oblivious that your old sinful life has been wiped off the books. So, friends, confirm God's invitation to you, his choice of you. Don't put it off; do it now. Do this, and you'll have your life on a firm footing, the streets paved and the way wide open into the eternal kingdom of our Master and Savior, Jesus Christ. -2 Peter 1: 5-11 (The Message Translation)

AN INVITATION TO PRACTICE THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES THIS LENTEN SEASON

Lent is the forty days of preparation between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Just as Jesus spent forty days fasting in the desert before the beginning of his public ministry, believers are invited during lent to prepare for Holy Week and Easter through forty days of more intentional prayer, fasting, repentance, almsgiving, and self-denial. On Ash Wednesday we have an opportunity to reflect on the state of our spiritual lives.

- How well are we cooperating with Christ and his Kingdom?
- How well are we growing in grace?

Spiritual disciplines are given to us as means of grace. They are “exercises unto godliness” that enable us to receive more of the life and power God offers to us through Christ. They prepare us for increasingly more interaction with the powers of the living Christ and his Kingdom.

What activities should we choose for our individual strategy for spiritual growth during this Lenten Season? While the list for possible spiritual disciplines might be inexhaustible, this guide focuses on the practices that have a proven track record across the centuries for helping followers of Christ journey in their faith.

Our primary source for all things spiritual is Holy Scripture. Our key secondary source for our Lenten Focus on the spiritual disciplines is *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* by Dallas Willard. Willard reminds us in this book that in Greek another word for “asceticism “ is “training,” as in athletes training for a race. Spiritual disciplines may be divided into two types: disciplines of abstinence and disciplines of engagement.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES OF ABSTINENCE

Key to our training is to first discern what habit or pursuit, harmless in itself, is keeping us from God. This habit or pursuit may be something that is generally regarded as a normal and legitimate desire (such as food, sleep, companionship, or sex), but in our distorted condition of humanity, this basic desire has been allowed to run a rebellious and harmful course. It may ultimately serve as the primary host of sin in our personality.

The seven “deadly” sins recognized throughout church history are pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lasciviousness. Each is a case of one or more legitimate desires gone wrong. According to Dallas Willard, “an adequate course of spiritual discipline will single out those tendencies that may harm our walk with God. By the carefully adapted arrangement of our circumstances and behavior, the spiritual disciplines will bring these basic desires into their proper coordination and subordination within the economy of life in his Kingdom.” You

are encouraged to commit to one discipline of abstinence and one discipline of engagement throughout the Season of Lent.

- **Solitude**

In solitude, we purposefully abstain from interaction with other human beings in order to free ourselves from conformity to social pattern, giving us the emotional and spiritual distance from others needed to see things in the light of eternity.

Prayerfully consider committing to spend one day per week during Lent in solitude.

- **Silence**

In silence we close off our souls from noise, music, and words, freeing ourselves to experience the reality of “just us and God.” It allows us to hear the gentle God who tells us that “in quietness and trust is your strength” (Isaiah 30:15).

Prayerfully consider committing yourself to silence for an hour each day or seven hours per week during Lent.

- **Fasting**

To fast is to abstain in some significant way from food and drink. Scripture is replete with references to fasting as the practice of abstaining from food for spiritual purposes (Ex 24, 34; 1 Kings 19; Mt 4, 6: 16, 9:15; Zech. 8:19, Lk 2:37, 18:12; Is 58; Esther 4:16; Daniel 10:3; Joel 2:15; Ezra 8:21-23). The primary purpose of fasting is to focus on God. The food we forgo is secondary to the focus on God. The normal means of fasting involved abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not water.

Fasting expresses a hunger for God, a deepened spiritual life, discernment, and connection with the Body of Christ. It intensifies the focus of prayer. Jesus told his disciples that some spiritual accomplishments were possible only by linking prayer with fasting. For Wesley, fasting was a way to deepen the experience of prayer.

Please prayerfully consider fasting from food sunup to sundown one day a week during Lent.

A guide to fasting is available on the Covenant UMC website (www.covenantaustin.org)

If you cannot fast from food, then please prayerfully consider fasting from one or more of the following throughout the Lenten Season:

- *TV and Radio*
- *Packaged, processed foods*
- *Gossiping and talking negatively about others*

- **Frugality**

In frugality we abstain from using money or goods in ways that merely satisfy our desires or hunger for status, glamour or luxury. Frugality frees our soul to trust in, worship and serve God.

Prayerfully consider abstaining from unnecessary shopping and spending throughout the Season of Lent.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES OF ENGAGEMENT

Spiritual disciplines of abstinence should be balanced by disciplines of engagement. Roughly speaking, the disciplines of abstinence counteract tendencies to sins of commission, and the disciplines of engagement counteract tendencies to sins of omission.¹ Ultimately, to live a balanced spiritual life on the path of growth in grace, we need to not only periodically withdraw from action, but to also engage in action.

- **Prayer**

As a spiritual discipline, prayer has its greatest force in strengthening the spiritual life only as we pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17; Phil 4:6).

Please prayerfully consider committing to praying at least three times daily throughout the Season of Lent.

- **Study**

Engaging with Scripture is a primary discipline of engagement. In study, we purposely look to see the Word of God at work in our lives and the lives of others, the church, history, and nature.

Please prayerfully consider committing to studying scripture daily throughout the Season of Lent.

¹ Willard, p. 176.

- **Worship**

In worship we dwell upon and express the greatness, beauty and goodness of God through thought, words, rituals, song and symbols.

Please prayerfully consider engaging daily in worship (alone or with others) throughout Lent.

- **Celebration**

Celebration completes worship, as it “dwells on the greatness of God as shown in his goodness to us. We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God’s greatness, beauty and goodness. We concentrate on our life and world as God’s work and as God’s gift to us.”²

Please prayerfully consider engaging daily in the spiritual discipline of celebration throughout the Season of Lent.

- **Service**

In service we engage our goods and strength in the active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world.³ Service can help train us from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment, or covetousness as we act unto God in our deeds.

Please prayerfully consider engaging in daily or weekly acts of service as spiritual disciplines throughout the Season of Lent.

- **Fellowship**

Gathered together, followers of Christ sustain the force of God’s presence much better than scattered individuals. The reciprocity and refining gifts of the gathered community are critical to our realization of a joyous and sustained level of life in Christ.

Please prayerfully consider committing to be with the gathered Body of Believers at least twice weekly throughout Lent.

² Ibid, p. 179

³ Ibid, p. 182

- **Confession**

In confession we let trusted others know our deepest weaknesses and failures.⁴ Truth is a powerful antidote to sin, helping us to turn away from continuing to sin and often avoid sin altogether.

Please prayerfully consider weekly confession to a trusted brother or sister in Christ throughout the Lenten Season.

Throughout the Season of Lent, we will go deep into the essentials of the spiritual life, exploring the means of grace God has given us to help us to die to our sin and be resurrected into abundant life by his power and presence. It may be a challenging time for many of us, but it will be a rich experience of deepening in our relationship with God as we learn to rely more heavily on his grace and power, instead of our own.

RESOURCES FOR PRACTICING THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

- *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, by Dallas Willard
- *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, by Richard J. Foster
- *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence*, by Ruth Haley Barton
- *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites*, by Lynn Baab
- *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, by Marjorie J. Thompson
- *Soul Tending: Life-Forming Practices for Older Youth and Young Adults* (Abingdon Press)
- Our Covenant UMC website also has guides to fasting and prayer:
www.covantaustin.org

⁴ Ibid, p 187.