

Spiritual Disciplines

A Series for Small Group Discussions

Charles and Susi Albrecht

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Table of Contents

- 1: Introduction
- 2: Grace and Discipline
- 3: Prayer
- 4: Silence and Solitude
- 5: Study
- 6: Fasting
- 7: Meditation
- 8: Submission
- 9: Service
- 10: Guidance
- 11: Confession
- 12: Worship
- 13: Celebration
- 14: Whole Life Stewardship
- 15: Spiritual Discipline – A Lifestyle

About the Authors...

About the Publisher...

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1: Introduction

Our loving God wants us to live a fulfilled life. Although he does not guarantee us a trouble-free existence, he does give instructions that strengthen our bond with him. God's purpose is to develop a loving relationship with each one of his children. One powerful way to know our Lord better is through the spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines can be described as behaviors that facilitate spiritual growth. The process of spiritual growth and development begins to take place when a person encounters God, and God begins to create a new level of consciousness or awareness. When we pursue each day as an exciting opportunity to develop a loving relationship with God, these disciplines will guide us to see our Father's heart more clearly.

Think of someone you have viewed as a mentor, or someone you have respected in the past. What characteristics caused you to think of this person?

In what ways do you want to be like this person? Why?

Some of us may have asked, "What are Christians expected to do on a day-to-day basis?" What would make us ask such a question?

There is a difference between imitating a good man and counterfeiting him.

– *Benjamin Franklin*

Key Scripture: John 14:5-15

In verse 7, we read, "If you really know me, you will know my Father as well." Why does Jesus respond to Thomas in this way?

What implications does this response have for us as Christians today? (Galatians 2:20)

What did Jesus mean when He said that those who believe Him will do even

greater things? (verse 12)

What might a nonbeliever see in a Christian that would help the nonbeliever to know Jesus or the Father?

What are some of the activities in which Jesus regularly participated? (These activities Willard refers to as “disciplines.”)

As a group, pray that God will lead the group in the coming discussions on the disciplines.

Almost 2,000 years later, can we truly follow Jesus Christ’s life-model, or is it simply impossible in today’s hectic world?

We can become like Christ by doing one thing – by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live. We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father... The Spirit of the Disciplines is nothing but the love of Jesus, with its resolute will to be like him whom we love.

– Dallas Willard,
The Spirit of the Disciplines

Challenge for growth

Meditation and prayer:

In the coming weeks, meditate on the importance of the spiritual disciplines in your life.

How have spiritual disciplines changed your life? How would you like them to

change your life? Petition God in prayer and thanksgiving to help you.

For further study

In your personal Bible study, take special notice of God's instruction on the different disciplines.

— *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard

— *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster

Charles and Susi Albrecht

2: Grace and Discipline

Christians live *in* grace and *by* grace, not by works. We cannot boast about our own works, no matter how good they are. God gets all the glory, for he is the one who motivates us to do anything good. Even the faith we have is a gift of God.

So, to ensure that God gets all the glory, should we sit back and do nothing? Should we not study unless God motivates us to feel like it, should we not pray unless he motivates us to feel like it, should we not do any good works unless he initiates them? Does any talk of discipline take the initiative away from God, give people opportunity to boast, and become a form of legalism?

Is discipline an enemy of grace? If it's all of grace, what need is there for any discipline? If God does the work, why should we try?

Parents: have you ever taught a child to do something by doing it with the child – so much so that you were actually doing all the work and the child was just following along? Did you want the child to try, or to quit trying? Give an example.

In 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul tells us, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” Who was doing the working – was it God, or was it Paul? What characteristic of God did Paul say was working in him?

All our responses to God's dealings with us and all our practice of the spiritual disciplines must be based on the knowledge that God is dealing with us in grace.

– Jerry Bridges,
The Discipline of Grace, p. 79

Key Scripture: Romans 12:1-8 (NIV)

After Paul has explained to the Romans that salvation is by grace through faith in

Jesus Christ as our atoning sacrifice, he now begins to stress some practical applications. Does he exhort us to be passive, to wait upon the Lord for him to work in us? Verses 1-2.

How might Paul respond if we asked him: “You tell us to be transformed by the *renewing of our minds*. How do we go about that?” Is that something we do, or do we wait for God to do it?

Paul says that we are members not just of Jesus Christ, but also of one another – we belong to one another (verse 5). How might this affect our behavior?

Paul talks about spiritual gifts – given by grace – in verses 6-8. Do these gifts of grace do their own work in our lives, or is there something we are supposed to do with them? Do our efforts take anything away from God’s glory?

In Galatians 2:20, Paul said, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God.” Who was doing the living – Paul, or Christ? (See 1 Corinthians 9:27 and Romans 15:18).

By themselves the spiritual disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done.

– Richard Foster,
Celebration of Discipline, p. 7

In Colossians 1:29, Paul explained how he proclaimed Christ: “To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.” Who was doing the working in Paul’s life? Are we to strive for grace in the same way? How can we labor without taking any credit for it?

John Piper says that God gives us faith, but yet it is still we who believe and trust. “It is unbiblical and irrational to say that, because the grace of God produces in us an active trust in God, we don’t need to exert an active trust in God. Is it not irrational to say, ‘God enables us to trust him; therefore we don’t need to trust him?’”

(<http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper98/09-20-98.htm>). How might this principle apply to works?

There is not a single instance in the New Testament teaching on holiness where we are taught to depend on the Holy Spirit without a corresponding exercise of discipline on our part.

– Jerry Bridges,
The Discipline of Grace, p. 130

Challenges for growth:

How can we work as hard as Paul did without being legalistic? Can we ask God for more zeal than we really want?

If we don't want that much zeal, why not? What is more important to us than zeal?

Since we belong to one another, what is my responsibility toward *you* to help you in obeying Paul's exhortations?

Do we look on grace as a cover for wrong-doing, or as a motivation for right-doing?

Michael Morrison

3: Prayer

Introduction

Prayer changes us. Prayer changes lives. Prayer changes history. It is a way to feel God's heartbeat. Knowing who God really is makes us want to conform to Jesus Christ and his way of life. God slowly and graciously reveals himself to us while we pray, and it is during those moments that we can breathe in deeply his love.

What did James mean in James 4:3, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passion"?

To ask for the "right" things involves a changed heart, new passions. We think no longer our own thoughts, but those of God's; we desire the things God desires, we start to love and care for the things God is concerned about; we realize that God's will for me and others is far better than my own will. Our thoughts change, our hearts change, and we learn to see life from His point of view.

The wonderful thing about prayer is that God meets us where we are. He comes alongside us to lead us into a deeper, more real relationship with him, not motivated by guilt, but driven by his love. In Matthew 6:9-13, the disciples, who may have prayed for some time, asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Jesus did then, and does now, teach us to pray. We can become his students in prayer today, and there is no need for anyone to feel they need to understand it all better before they can start. Instead, we can look forward to a life-long process.

Key Scripture: Matthew 6: 9-13

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

(You might want to recite the Lord's Prayer together as a group.)

As a child, did somebody teach you to pray, or give you a model prayer? Do you remember what you prayed for?

Jesus taught us to come to the Father like little children. What are some of the characteristics that a child exhibits when talking to a loving parent? (Example: honesty, openness, imagination, etc.)

When you pray, do you *truly* expect your prayers to be answered? Why or why not?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 we read, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." A lack of endurance is one of the greatest causes of defeat. What can we do to motivate ourselves to stay disciplined, to endure in prayer, especially when it seems to us that God is not answering?

**We don't wait well. We're into microwaving;
God, on the other hand, is usually into
marinating.**

– C. Peter Wagner

"One of the most critical aspects in learning to pray for others is to get in contact with God so his life and power can flow through us into others" (*Richard Foster*). How can we "tune in" to God in order to pray more effectively for others?

How do you *listen* to God? How does he communicate with you?

"Answers to prayer are wonderful, but they are secondary to the main function of prayer, which is a growing, perpetual communion. It is out of this refreshing life of communion with Jesus Christ that answered prayer comes as a happy by-product" (*Richard Foster*). How do you feel about this statement?

Definition of communion: a) mutual participation; b) an act or instance of sharing; c) intimate fellowship or rapport.

– *Webster's Dictionary*

Let's pretend you are meeting a new Christian, who has been in the faith only a few days. She feels that prayer is mainly intense and difficult, even frightening. How would you assure her to continue to pray?

How would you respond to someone who makes the following statement: "God knows the end from the beginning, he knows what's best for everyone, so why should I bother to pray? I'm afraid I might pray for the wrong thing."

Do you think it is important to view prayer as a learning process? Why?

Challenge for growth

What should we do when we don't feel like praying? Give it some serious thought. Try to find ways to discipline yourself to pray anyway, not out of guilt, but motivated by your love for God.

Here is a little experiment for you: Go through a whole day offering a silent prayer for *every* person you come in contact with. Record what you have learned from that experience.

Many people around us do not know the Lord. Make a list and start praying for the people you know who need to know that God loves them. How can you share God's love with them?

Spend more time in prayer of praise, worship and thanksgiving.

S. Albrecht

4: Silence and Solitude

Introduction

In today's world a wide range of impulses bombards us. We have radios in our homes, in our offices, and in our cars. Our homes have access to scores of television channels and videos. There are games and computers and the internet. There are more magazines, newspapers and books than we could ever read. People, sounds and things are everywhere we go.

Dr. Richard Peace writes, "The spiritual disciplines keep us alert to the presence of God." He continued that "the spiritual disciplines are a way of learning to hear again; a way to respond positively to God." Does it seem that God has been pushed out by the sensory overload from our surroundings?

Where do you go, or, what do you do to unwind when you have had one of those hectic days? Why do you find this to be of comfort?

Scriptural theme: Luke 5:15-16; 6:12-13

Consider three or four of the following discussion items regarding the scriptural theme and the disciplines of silence and solitude:

Why are references like these recorded in the Gospels?

Do you think Jesus was strengthened by his time on the mountain? If so, how?

Do people in today's world find it difficult to find "quiet time?" What are things that can either hinder or encourage this type of quality time?

Silence is the way to make solitude a reality.

– Henry Nouwen

It is said that solitude is a fundamental discipline. Can something really be learned from spending time alone, from taking time in silence and solitude?

According to Richard Foster, “Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment, [and it] is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place.” What are your thoughts on this perspective?

As individuals, take a few quiet minutes during the meeting to reread the theme passages silently. What is God saying to you in these passages?

Sometimes people will withdraw from their normal surroundings when searching for a quiet place. How can this be beneficial?

Language has created the word “loneliness” to express the pain of being alone, and the word “solitude” to express the glory of being alone.

— *Paul Tillich*

Shut thy door upon thee and call to thee Jesus
thy love; dwell with him in thy cell for thou
shalt not find elsewhere so great peace.

— *Thomas a Kempis*

Challenge for growth

During your prayers, spend some time in silence to focus on God’s nature and what he may be saying to you.

In the coming weeks, schedule a period of time away from all the distractions in your daily life. Schedule a time of solitude.

Pray that God will lead you as you practice the disciplines of silence and solitude.

We have outlined two popular lists of disciplines as compiled by Dallas Willard and Richard Foster. The theme *Discipline of Grace* has been the focus of other authors, and has also been included in our series.

Dallas Willard	Richard Foster
<i>Disciplines of Abstinence</i>	<i>Inward Disciplines</i>
Solitude	Meditation
Silence	Prayer
Fasting	Fasting
Frugality	Study
Chastity	
Secrecy	<i>Outward Disciplines</i>
Sacrifice	Simplicity
	Solitude
<i>Disciplines of Engagement</i>	Submission
Study	Service
Worship	
Celebration	<i>Corporate Disciplines</i>
Service	Confession
Prayer	Worship
Fellowship	Guidance
Confession	Celebration
Submission	

5: Study

In the spiritual discipline of study, we engage ourselves, above all, with the written and spoken Word of God. In Romans 12:2, the apostle Paul tells us that we are transformed through the renewal of the mind, and that we cannot just simply copy the behavior of those around us. The discipline of study is an important vehicle by which our minds are renewed by those things that are important to God. Study will help to release us from the bondage of fear and anxieties, and replace that with the knowledge of God's grace, which will reach the depth of our hearts, minds and souls.

Jesus said in John 8:32, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Without the truth, we will not be truly free. As we all know, this principle applies to every area, whether we study biology, mathematics or science. But it is especially true in reference to our spiritual walk. In this discussion, we want to focus on our study of spiritual issues.

As we learn from each other, we will be able to identify pitfalls, joys and challenges. The goal is to more fully experience the liberation that study brings.

Key Scripture: Philippians 4:8

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

What is your favorite time of the day? When do you feel most energetic, alive and able to concentrate?

In your own words, describe what "study" means to you, and what it does not mean.

In 1 Timothy 4:7 we read, "Don't waste time arguing over foolish ideas and silly myths and legends. Spend your time and energy in the exercise of keeping spiritually fit" (*The Living Bible*). Studying the right things is as important as studying in general. How

do you determine what the right things for you to study are?

Outside the Bible, what book, teacher, lecture, etc. have had the most profound impact on your spiritual life?

Have you ever had the experience that after careful, analytical, serious study you changed your actions, opinion or even life style? Please share an example with the group.

He who studies only men, will get the
body of knowledge without the soul; and he who
studies only books, the soul without the body.
He who, to what he sees, adds observation, and
to what he reads, reflection, is in the right road
to knowledge, provided that in scrutinizing the
hearts of others, he neglects not his own.
– Caleb Colton

Why does study produce joy?

Do you think our study affects those around us? How?

In the Old Testament, the Israelites were instructed to write the laws on gates and doorposts and bind them to their wrists so that “they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” (Deuteronomy 11:18). The purpose of this instruction was to direct their minds *repeatedly* and *regularly* towards God, and his instructions on human relationships. Today, we no longer take part in that practice. But how can we discipline ourselves to *regularly* and *repeatedly* study God’s words to make it easier for his laws to be written in our hearts? What motivates you?

We live hectic, busy lives, and we are often pulled in many different directions. How can we positively encourage one another in the discipline of study?

Prayer

As a group, spend some time in prayer, asking God to direct and bless our personal and collective study, so that we can know our Lord better and respond to him

more fully.

Ask God to help each member to prioritize his or her life, so we can make adequate time to seek God through study.

Thank God for allowing us to know him.

Challenge for growth

The call to study – Proverbs 1:1-9; 23:12, 23.

The source of truth – James 1:5; Hebrews 4:11-13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

What to study – Philippians 4: 8-9; Colossians 3:1-17.

The value of study – Luke 10:38-42.

Active study – Ezra 7:10; James 1:19-25.

S. Albrecht

Materials used:

Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster

The Spirit of the Disciplines, Dallas Willard

Committing Ourselves to Be Changed by God, Foundation of Christian Living

6: Fasting

Introduction

If you seek a closer walk with God, consider fasting. Throughout Scripture, fasting refers to abstaining from food, or food and drink, for spiritual purposes. Fasting is more than a diet adjustment; it involves spiritual intensity and intercession. Fasting should always be accompanied with prayer, meditation, and Bible study.

We should never be motivated by the mistaken idea that our fasting will move God to do what we want. Even if we wanted to, we could never manipulate God. *The purpose of our fasting is to move us closer to God and to seek his will in our lives.*

One of the greatest spiritual benefits of fasting is becoming more aware of our own inadequacies and God's adequacy; becoming more aware of our own failings and his self-sufficiency. The purpose of all disciplines, including fasting, is to change us so that we may become more Christ-like. Fasting helps us to listen to what God wants us to be and do.

The list of biblical personages who fasted reads like a *Who's Who* of Scripture. For example: Moses the lawgiver, David the king, Elijah the prophet, Esther the queen, Daniel the advisor to kings, Anna the prophetess, Paul the apostle, and Jesus Christ the incarnate Son.

A word of caution: Before anyone attempts to go on a fast, please consult your physician if you have health problems such as diabetes, kidney disorders, or other serious conditions. The normal spiritual fast is going without food for a period of time during which you ingest only liquids (water and/or juice). The duration can be one day or several days. Some Christians fast on juice or water up to a week. The absolute fast is abstaining from both food and water. The duration shouldn't exceed one or two days unless you have discussed absolute fasting ahead of time with your doctor.

1st key passage: Matthew 6:16-18

Does Jesus command fasting, or does he only comment on how to fast properly? What should we do and how should we look when fasting? Why?

One key to fasting is motivation. What are the differences in motivation between truly seeking God and fasting to gain power or admiration?

2nd key passage: Matthew 9:14-15

Did Jesus expect his disciples to fast after he was gone?

It is said that fasting brings us closer to God. Could this be one of the reasons Jesus said his disciples would fast after he would no longer be with them? What are other reasons?

Fasting is not an end in itself; it is a means by which we can worship the Lord and submit ourselves in humility to Him. We don't make God love us any more than He already does if we fast, or if we fast longer. Fasting invites God into the problem. Then in the strength of God, victory is possible.

– *Elmer L. Towns*

3rd key passage: Isaiah 58:3-10

In this passage, Isaiah tells us that the Jews were fasting, but God was not answering their requests. Why not? What kind of fast does God want?

When people turn from mistreating others, to helping them with their needs, does that in itself count as fasting? Are we to obey when we fast, obey before we fast, or obey instead of fasting?

Is fasting a way to get God to answer our prayers? Will fasting solve our

problems? Will it lead to more effective evangelism? Does it solve humanitarian problems? What does God promise to do if his people fast in the right way? Will we gain power over sin?

Some may wish to share how God has answered their prayers when they were fasting for his intervention.

Fasting reminds us that we are sustained “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Food does not sustain us; God sustains us.

– *Richard J. Foster*

When we fast and pour our heart out to God, it’s been said that he gives us His “eyes” to see the situation or the problem as it really exists. How is this beneficial to us?

During the fast, why is it helpful to read various portions of Scripture that may apply to our situation and then meditate on them?

Challenge for growth

The next time you feel the need to fast for any spiritual reason, please consider these benefits that fasting produces: 1) spiritual examination and introspection; 2) spiritual confession; 3) spiritual intercession. In what way does fasting help us pray for others?

7: Meditation

Introduction

When considering meditation, some people think of images such as incense, candles, dark rooms filled with people sitting cross-legged on the floor humming “Ommmm.” There are many forms of meditation, which is part of almost every form of religion. However, Christian meditation can be virtually the opposite of Eastern meditation.

Christian meditation is listening, sensing, and heeding the life and light of Jesus Christ. Richard Foster puts it this way:

In the discipline of meditation we are not so much acting as we are opening ourselves to be acted upon. We invite the Holy Spirit to come and work within us – teaching, cleansing, comforting, and rebuking. We also surround ourselves with the strong light of Christ to protect us from any influences not of God.

Meditation gives us the wondrous and glorious opportunity to dwell completely on the goodness and perfection of our Lord. He wants you and me to be in communion with him so that we can learn his will, realize his purpose, believe his promises, see his work and imitate his way for us.

In the last one or two weeks, what are some steps you were able to take in applying what we have learned from the spiritual disciplines?

What are the first images that come to your mind when you think of meditation?

Do you feel comfortable and confident to meditate? Do you ever feel that meditation is too difficult, complicated or weird? Why?

In the midst of a very busy ministry Jesus made it a habit to withdraw many times to be alone (see Matthew 4: 1-11; 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:31; Luke 6:12, etc.). As you meditate on one of these scriptures, please share with the group what you think Jesus did during those important times.

From your experience, what is the purpose for meditating on God's Word? How do you think obedience is related to this topic? Please read what Jesus said in John 5:19 and 30.

In your opinion, are people around us affected when we make time for the discipline of meditation? Why or why not?

What happens in meditation is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart.

— *Richard Foster*

Meditation as a group

Facilitator: You may wish to choose different scriptures. The following is just a suggestion.

God greatly desires to spend time alone with us. After all, we are his children. Please read John 1:12 and Galatians 3:26. Our heavenly Father wants to know us, and he wants us to know him. Think about this: The Creator of the universe wants to meet with us alone daily.

What do you and God do when you are alone together?

To be in the presence of God is to change. How is God changing you when you are in his presence?

Do you feel like a child of God?

You are not who you are because of your own or others' opinions. You are who you are because of what God says about you. In 1 Peter 1:24-25 we read, "Our natural lives will fade as grass does when it becomes all brown and dry. All our greatness is like a flower that droops and falls, but the Word of the Lord will last forever."

Based on the above verses, why do you think it is important to see yourself from God's perspective rather than the world's?

How does meditating on God's words change your self-image?
How is it molding your view of others?

Challenge for growth

As you sit down to read the Bible and spend time with God in prayer and meditation, picture Jesus sitting next to you in your living room. Imagine he turns to you and asks you: "I love you so much. Tell me what I can do for you today." Then tell him exactly what is in your heart – your desires, hopes, needs, fears, and joys.

When you have finished, turn now to Jesus and ask him the same question: "Jesus, I love you so much. Please tell me what I can do for you today." As you become quiet, listen to what God is saying to you. God wants us to live out our spiritual journey in the ordinary events of our daily lives.

This is an example of how to meditate. God will give us many other ways to enter into a fuller life with Him through meditation.

S. and C. Albrecht

Materials used

Celebration of Discipline – Richard Foster

The Spirit of the Disciplines – Dallas Willard

Experiencing the Word in Your Life – Priorities for Living

Experiencing God – Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King

8: Submission

Introduction

As we examine and learn about the life of Jesus Christ, we see that his willingness to serve had roots in his confidence that God loved him. Jesus found strength and assurance in knowing how important he was to his Father. This knowledge of his Father's love enabled Jesus to serve people and ultimately demonstrate the greatest form of submission – his death on the cross. The cross has since become the symbol of both submission and freedom to Christians around the world.

Throughout the Bible God teaches us about submission, yet there are many misconceptions about this topic. Some feel that this discipline is mainly reserved for married couples and children, or people of lesser rank or status. Also, a deficient teaching and understanding on the topic of submission has manipulated, suppressed and even destroyed many people throughout the world.

The discipline of submission, and its consequence of freedom, is for all Christians. Submission is about our recognition that we need God, our realistic evaluation of our abilities, and our humble willingness to serve.

Please read 1 Peter 5:5-7

What comes to mind when you hear the word “submission”?

In your own words, what does submission mean? (Attitudes, actions, etc.) What is submission *not*?

What value does our society place on submission? How is God's view different?

We read in verses 6 and 7: “If you will humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, in his good time he will lift you up. Let him have all your worries and cares, for he is always thinking about you and watching everything that concerns you.”

How does submission to God bring us freedom? Have you thought about this

concept before, that is, that submission is a way to freedom? Read John 8 30-36.

Jesus said to the disciples, “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who keeps his life for himself shall lose it; and anyone who loses his life for me shall find it again.” Matthew 16:24–25 (*The Living Bible*)

Please read Philippians 2: 1-11

After carefully reading the above passage, how has Jesus exemplified submission and humility?

In verse 3 we read: “Don’t be selfish; don’t live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself.” (*The Living Bible*)

Why do we tend to value and desire praise from our peers more than recognition and praise from God?

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

— *Martin Luther*

How can we keep a balance between cultivating a submissive, humble attitude, and recognizing our priceless value in God’s sight? Why is it important to keep that balance?

Ephesians 5:21 says simply: “Honor Christ by submitting to each other.” How do you plan to demonstrate a healthy spirit of submission this week in your relationships with others?

Challenge for growth

Consider your relationship with God. Are there areas in your life that you have not yet submitted to God?

Do you recognize your need for God, especially in areas where you are successful? If so, thank God for it. If not, ask God to give you a greater awareness of your need for him in your life.

Think of your strengths and weaknesses. You might want to list ten of each on a piece of paper. How are you using your strengths to serve God? How are you planning to develop strength from your weaknesses?

Think of ways, places, or opportunities you would like to serve. Take a step forward this week and consider serving in one of these areas.

Consider further study on submission, as there are many more aspects and scriptures dealing with this topic.

S. Albrecht

Materials used:

The Spirit of the Disciplines – Dallas Willard

Celebration of Discipline – Richard Foster

The Living Bible

The Busy Christian's Guide to Experiencing God More – William Watkins

9: Service

Introduction

When we think about the spiritual disciplines, the discipline of service may be the easiest for us to visualize. In spite of this fact, *the spirit* of service can often go without enough consideration. The spiritual value in acts of service is very important for Christians to contemplate and understand, as it, in part, reveals the individual's heart and life.

Let's discuss the profound example of service that Jesus gave us.

Theme passage: Mark 10:35-45

When you go into a store or restaurant, what is a sign of "good service"?

What does it mean when we instruct someone to "practice what you preach"?

After reading the theme passage, why does Jesus use a servant to demonstrate a person considered to be worthy of greatness? How do you think this also describes a great person in our society?

Why does God link the themes of service and leadership, and how do you see them relate?

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. (John 13:12-16, NIV)

Although the disciples did not want Jesus to wash their feet, he did it as a physical sign of service. How does Jesus serve us in our daily lives? Are there motivations in service that lessen or damage the service itself?

Sometimes it is easier to serve people we know rather than strangers or people with whom we do not feel comfortable. Why is that?

Service is the overflow which pours from a life filled with love and devotion. But strictly speaking, there is no *call* to do that. Service is what I bring to the relationship and is the reflection of my identification with the nature of God. Service becomes a natural part of my life. God brings me into the proper relationship with Himself so that I can understand His call, and then I serve Him on my own out of a motivation of absolute love.

— *Oswald Chambers*

In verse 45 of Mark 10 we see the clearest statement regarding the saving grace of the Messiahship of Jesus. Why do you think this reference occurs in a passage instructing

us to be a servant?

Challenge for growth

As a group, plan a special community service project for the coming month. As you approach the project, cover all aspects of it in discussion and prayer.

Spend time in service of those we may not know well, or those we may naturally find it more difficult to serve.

C. Albrecht

Materials used

The Spirit of the Disciplines – Dallas Willard

Celebration of Discipline – Richard Foster

10: Guidance

Introduction

The discipline of seeking guidance goes to the heart of walking with God. Guidance involves us hearing God's voice and obeying him. It is not only seeking his will in a specific matter, but it is a constant way of life.

God provides guidance to his people in two ways. One is individual guidance, where God gives each of his children divine instruction through Scripture, reason, circumstances, and through prompting of the Spirit in the individual's heart. In corporate guidance, God guides groups of people who gather in fellowship to seek the will of God. Both aspects are important to submit to as we seek to live in response to the voice of God.

How would you explain the difference between seeking the advice of a wise friend and seeking *God's guidance* with the help of mature and faithful Christians?

Please read Matthew 18:19-20.

Take a moment to meditate on these words from God and ask yourself: How is fellowship with other Christians vital to seeking both individual and corporate guidance from God? Please share your thoughts with the group.

The Western cultures lay a heavy emphasis on individualism. Do you see results of this in our churches?

What sometimes holds us back from asking close Christian friends to help us seek God's guidance before making a decision or entering on a new path?

Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence much better than scattered individuals. The fire of God kindles higher as the brands are heaped together and each is warmed by the other's flame.

— *Dallas Willard*

In 1 John 4:1 we read: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” How do we test the spirits? (Read verses 2-6.)

As you follow Jesus one day at a time, He will keep you right in the center of God's will... Understanding what God is about to do where I am is more important than telling God what I want to do for Him.

— *Experiencing God,*
by Blackaby and King

Please read 1 John 4:7-16 and meditate on these words for a moment. Living in guidance comes through entering into a loving friendship with God. When we genuinely love God and others and accept his love for us, then we are promised to “know God” (verses 7-8). What should you change in your life (either add or drop from your life) in order to deepen your intimacy with Christ?

As we seek guidance in our lives, we often ask: “What is God's will in my life?” How will our thinking change if we would ask: “What is God's will, and how can I adjust my life to him?”

In Philippians 2:13 we read: “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” As you read these powerful words, you might want to take a moment and pray about the following points for each other in the group (you might want to break up into groups of two or three):

God is absolutely trustworthy.

Jesus is the way.

I will follow God one day at a time.

I will follow God even when he does not show me all the details of the journey.

I will search for God's will, and then live my life accordingly.

I will pray that God will show me his perspective.

I will seek to live a God-centered life, not a self-centered life.

S. Albrecht

Materials used:

Celebration of Discipline – Richard Foster

The Spirit of the Disciplines – Dallas Willard

In Search of Guidance – Dallas Willard

Experiencing God – Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King

11: Confession

Introduction

The awesome God we worship is eager to forgive us, as is revealed in the words of Psalm 103: “As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove my sin.” With these words, he offers us a guilt-free existence. But without acknowledging our sins before God and depending on his mercy to help us change, guilt and shame can constantly plague us. Confession and forgiveness are realities that transform us, and it is a means of healing and transformation for the inner spirit.

Some might wonder why confession is listed as a discipline, since it is possible only through the grace of God. Unless God gives the grace, no genuine confession can be made. But confession is also a discipline because there are things we should do. The Bible teaches us how to confess.

In 1 Timothy 2:5 we read that “there is one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.” However, we can also appreciate the teaching to “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Through confession and the promise of forgiveness, we can look forward to a genuinely changed life.

You have probably heard the saying, “Confession is good for the soul.” Why is that?

First key passage: 1 John 1: 5-10; 2:1-2

Have you ever felt like you need to “clean up your life” before turning it over to Jesus Christ? Do you sometimes feel Jesus wants you not for who you are now, but for who you could be?

After reading the above passage in the Bible, explain in your own words what it means to you that Jesus is the Advocate, the Righteous One and the Atoning Sacrifice.

Sin often comes packaged in ways that make it hard for us to identify. To really appreciate what confession does for us, we need to see what sin does *to* us. Discuss for a moment what sin is and how it affects our lives.

Do you think you take your sins too seriously, too lightly, or do you feel you have a proper perspective on it? Please explain.

Confession is a means for pursuing purity. —
Anonymous

In Psalm 32:1-2 and 6 we read: “What happiness for those whose guilt has been forgiven! What joys when sins are covered over! What relief for those who have confessed their sins and God has cleared their record.... Now I say that each believer should confess his sins to God when he is aware of them, while there is time to be forgiven. Judgment will not touch him if he does” (*The Living Bible*). What is *God’s part* and what is *your part* in the confession process?

Second key passage: James 5:16

How do you feel about this instruction? Relieved, embarrassed, thankful, uncomfortable, not sure what to think?

Have you ever confessed a sin to a trusted believer and received prayers? Why did you feel the need to do so? Has anyone ever betrayed your trust?

Richard Foster writes:

Confession is a difficult discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. But if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God’s love and to confess our needs openly before a brother or sister. We know we are not alone in our sin. The fear and pride that cling to us like barnacles cling to others also. We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals. Our

humanity is no longer denied, but transformed.

How do you feel about this statement?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark; but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light.

What is your reaction?

How can confession benefit you in healing past wounds?

When you feel the need to confess a sin and seek the support and love of a Christian friend, to whom would you go (what qualities does the person have)?

What would you say and how would you react if a Christian friend asked you if he/she could confess a sin to you? How would you prepare yourself?

Here are some pitfalls to be aware of:

Can't keep a confidence

Lack of empathy or understanding

Horrified at the revealing of certain sins

Shrug off with a "that's not so bad," whitewashing the whole thing

Trying to "fix" the person

Not really listening, but interrupting with own advice

Not willing to pray for one another right then and there

Challenge for growth

In the next few days, take some time to study the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Pay careful attention to the father's reaction and the son's behavior. Then turn your thoughts toward your heavenly Father. Consider the high cost he paid to redeem you

and how fully he has forgiven you. Read Psalm 103:1-14.

Examine your life in regards to confession. Are there sins in your life you confessed to God, but a persistent doubt of forgiveness plagues your life? You don't feel released from that sin. You still feel hurt. You feel misery and bitterness. Prayerfully consider whether you should confess this sin or hurt to a trusted fellow Christian, so God can show you his love and support through one of his children.

Your pastor might be able to help you in the confession process and give you further guidance.

Final note: Please do not think that God won't forgive us unless we repent of every sin we have ever done. No; we are unable to remember all the sins we have done, but he forgives us anyway. Jesus died for our sins, purchased forgiveness for us, before we were even born. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, *not counting people's sins against them*" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

S. Albrecht

12: Worship

Introduction

“The Lamb is worthy – the Lamb who was slain. He is worthy to receive the power, and the riches, and the wisdom, and the strength, and the honor, and the glory, and the blessing.” In these beautiful words from Revelation 5:12-13 we see a powerful example of worship. These inspired words are filled with wonder as they describe the reality of Jesus Christ.

The Bible teaches us how to worship and lift up the name of God so our lives can be changed through it. In John 4:23 we see that God is the one who seeks and draws us into worship. Worship is our human response to God’s divine initiative.

When they think of worship, some people think of singing, attending church services or praying. These are certainly beautiful expressions of worship, but it goes beyond that. *Worship is what our lives ought to be – a dynamic, everlasting celebration of God.* Our spiritual service of worship is ultimately giving ourselves to him gladly and sacrificially with each passing day – it is a lifestyle. This is our privilege, our purpose and our fulfillment.

Key passage: Romans 12:1-2

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Please share with the group what worship means to you. Discuss with one another what may be new to you about this topic, and what you have learned in the last few months or years.

We just read that we ought to offer our bodies “as living sacrifices.” What do you understand that to mean?

What does verse 2 of the passage add to your understanding of true worship?

In your own words, what is the difference between *attending worship* and *living in worship*?

How does regular fellowship with other believers help you worship God with new and fresh eagerness?

When is it the hardest for you to concentrate on worshipping God?

When I’m sick or hurting

When bad things happen to me or someone I love

When something really good is happening to me

When I’m really busy

Other

Have you found ways that help you remain focused on God?

How can worshipping Jesus transform lives of people around us? Have you seen any of that kind of change in the people with whom you have had contact?

In John 4:23 we read, “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.” How does God seek you, drawing you to worship him?

Because “God is spirit” (without material being), worship must be bound up with spiritual realities, not physical formalities. Consequently, true worship is not limited by time, place or ceremony. To worship in “truth” means to worship the true God, honestly, genuinely, and from the heart.”

—J. Carl Laney

There are many different ways, forms and traditions that may aid us in worshipping God. The New Testament does not tell us to follow a particular form for worship, other than to worship in spirit and truth. The forms Christians use today are not the worship, they simply help lead us *into* the worship. How do you see this happening in your congregation and in your personal worship?

The first commandment Jesus gives us is to worship God above all other things: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

Richard Foster makes the following statement about the priority of worship: “The divine priority is worship first, service second. Our lives are to be punctuated with praise, thanksgiving, and adoration. Service flows out of worship. Service as a substitute for worship is idolatry. One grave temptation we all face is to run around answering calls to service without ministering to the Lord himself.” Please discuss this concept.

Challenge for growth

Look up some passages in the Bible that especially inspire you and deal with worshipping God (for example, Matthew 4:10, Romans 11:33-36, Psalms 116, 135, 138, 139 and 145). Sing some hymns or praise songs to God that especially move you.

As you study these passages and sing those songs, use each as an opportunity for worship. For what can you praise God? What thanks can you offer him?

Look at your life and ask yourself: What can lead me to adore him more today than I did yesterday?

Restudy the key passage for this guide, Romans 12:1-2. What does worshipping God include and exclude? Ask yourself these questions: How am I hampering my life of worship by conforming to the world? How can I encourage my life of worship by renewing my mind?

S. Albrecht

The Busy Christian’s Guide to Experiencing God More – William Watkins

Celebration of Discipline – Richard Foster

The Spirit of the Disciplines – Dallas Willard

In Search of Guidance – Dallas Willard

Seeds of Hope – Henri Nouwen

13: Celebration

Introduction

When Jesus entered the world as a human being, great celebration was taking place in heaven, as the angel announced the Savior's birth to the shepherds:

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:10-14)

In the Old Testament we learn about the year of Jubilee, which was a celebration of the gracious provision of God. During that time debts were canceled, slaves were set free, no crops were being planted and property was returned to the original owner.

But in today's hectic, stressful and violent world, how can we experience the true joy that comes from God? Can we have freedom from anxiety and care, which forms the basis for celebration? Harvey Cox has said that, "modern man has been pressed so hard toward useful work and rational calculation he has all but forgotten the joy of ecstatic celebration."

The discipline of celebration is essential in our lives. Richard Foster put it this way: "Celebration is central to all the Spiritual Disciplines. Without a joyful spirit of festivity the Disciplines become dull, death-breathing tools in the hands of modern Pharisees."

Let us now share in our joy, and learn how each of us celebrates the new life we have in Jesus.

Do you enjoy God? Please describe your enjoyment to the rest of the group.

Is it easy for you to laugh at yourself?

**The true expression of Christianity is not a sigh,
but a song.**

– Robert E. Harris, Revelation

Do you remember a time in your life when you knew you had to endure a difficult time for a while but there was going to be great joy afterwards? (For example: a woman endures labor pains, but the joy of the newborn baby is beyond words. A newlywed couple might endure some difficulty adjusting to one another, but they look forward to a joyful life together. Learning a new instrument may be painful on the ear in the beginning, but after a while, the noise turns to music.)

**The Christian should be an alleluia from head to
foot!**

– Augustine of Hippo

Please read Philippians 4:4-7. The joy of the Lord is not a mere good feeling, as our lives often include suffering, sorrow, disappointments and pain. Please take some time discussing this passage with one another. What does it mean to be full of joy always? What does it NOT mean?

How does selfishness hinder real celebration?

What role does thankfulness have in regards to celebration?

Joy is the echo of God's life in us.

–Dom Joseph Marmion

Please read Luke 11:27-28. Jesus said that it is an even greater blessing to live in obedience than to have been the mother of the Messiah! Think about this profound statement Jesus made. God teaches us that joy comes *through* obedience to Jesus, and joy *results from* obedience to Jesus Christ. What do you think are God's ways of bringing his joy to your life?

Dallas Willard wrote this about celebration: "Holy delight and joy is the great

antidote to despair and is a wellspring of genuine gratitude.” Have you experienced that?

The name of Jesus is honey in the mouth, music
to the ear, a cry of gladness in the heart.

– *St. Bernard*

“There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:4). God is encouraging us to seize the season and embrace it for what it is. Dallas Willard wrote, “We dishonor God as much by fearing and avoiding pleasure as we do by dependence upon it or living for it.” (We are talking about godly, wholesome and healthy pleasure.) What do you think about this statement?

Why do you think we feel good after an evening with friends, filled with laughter, fun games, good music, food and drink? What are some genuine ways to promote true celebration? (Maybe your group has a wonderful reason to celebrate! Think about it and see what everyone thinks.)

A dance of joy

Taken from *The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, by Heinrich Suso. He imagines Jesus saying:

In the Godhead I play the game of bliss,
Such joy the angels find in this,
That unto them a thousand years
But as one little hour appears.
Happy is he who, in joyous security,
Shall take Me by My beautiful hand,
And join in My sweet diversions,
And dance forever the dance of joy,
Amid the ravishing delights,
Of the kingdom of heaven.

Resources used:

Celebration of Discipline – Richard Foster

The Spirit of the Disciplines – Dallas Willard

Enjoying the Presence of God – Jan Johnson

14: Whole Life Stewardship

Introduction

As we grow in our Christian lives, we come to a deeper and deeper realization that every good thing we receive, our Father gives us. We are in a life-long process as stewards of his possessions. Whole life stewardship is a life management style; in other words, it is not some person's way of raising money, but God's way of raising disciples. In three steps, we see that Christian stewardship is God's resources, deployed through God's people, to accomplish God's mission.

In the past week, describe something in your schedule that took the most time or emotional energy.

If you were to open your calendar or daily planner, what would you find in it about how your time is scheduled?

It has been said that "time wasted is forever lost." How does this make you feel?

Theme passage: Matthew 25:14-30

After reading the theme passage, why do you think Jesus says that the two servants are worthy of greatness?

Take a moment to think about the talents that God has given you. How effectively do you feel you are using those talents? How would you feel if the master returned today?

Do you think the master reacted properly to the servant who originally received one talent? Why do you feel this way?

Can there be improper motivations in the way we use our talents?

I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess.

— Martin Luther

According to Dallas Willard, "to trust in riches...is to count upon them to obtain

or secure what we treasure most. It is to think that they will bring us happiness and well-being. When we also possess the riches we trust in, we may suppose that we are secure..." Why do the possessions in our home sometimes give us a feeling of security?

Seeking more and more of something can become an addiction. Richard Foster states, "The person who does not seek the kingdom first does not seek it at all. Worthy as all other concerns may be, the moment *they* become the focus of our efforts they become idolatry." How would you summarize the Bible's teaching on possessions?

God has given us two hands – one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not cisterns for hoarding; we are channels for sharing.

– *Billy Graham*

When you give an offering as an act of worship, what feelings do you experience?

In Luke 12:13-21 we read a parable about the rich fool. Specifically, in verses 20-21 we read, "God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.'" What do you think it means to be "rich towards God"?

We know that God blesses us daily. What one thing has God given you this week that has been especially meaningful?

Challenge for growth

In the coming week, spend a few moments each morning to think about how you will spend your time and energy that day.

Specifically ask God in prayer to use your home and possession for his work.

In the following ways, make a commitment to give to God: a) first; b) systematically; c) cheerfully; d) regardless of your circumstances; e) proportionately; f) thoughtfully; and g) eternally. – From Brian Kluth in his article "The Grace of Giving."

Materials used

The Spirit of the Disciplines – Dallas Willard

“The Grace of Giving” – Brian Kluth, www.kluth.org/people/grace.htm

Celebration of Discipline – Richard Foster

Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life – Donald S. Whitney

15: Spiritual Discipline – A Lifestyle

Introduction

In concluding this series on spiritual disciplines, it is our hope that this study series was helpful in your discussions and that it revealed and renewed your understanding. Hopefully, it helped lead us to a closer walk with Jesus Christ. To us, it has been a bit like exploring the attic of an old house and coming across a huge trunk, loaded with priceless treasures making present life more meaningful. We realize that studying and practicing spiritual discipline is a life-long commitment, and we all need to recommit ourselves to it on a regular basis.

So much can be gained by living a life of discipline. It gives us liberation from fear and self-interest and shows us the way into real joy. Also, it guides the way to mature Christian spirituality, having Jesus as the eternal focus in our lives. We need to realize that we live in grace and by grace, and not by works. God gets all the glory, for he is the one who motivates us to do anything good.

Here is a summary of the disciplines we covered:

Introduction to Spiritual Disciplines – Behavior that facilitates spiritual growth

Grace and Discipline – Christians live in grace and by grace, not works

Prayer – God meets us where we are

Silence and Solitude – A way to keep us alert to the presence of God

Study – Engaging ourselves with the written and spoken Word of God

Fasting – Spiritual intensity and intercession by seeking his will

Meditation – Listening, sensing and heeding the life and light of Jesus Christ

Submission – The ultimate act of submission – Jesus' death on the cross

Service – The spirit of service reveals, in part, the individual's heart and life

Guidance – Hearing God's voice and obeying him

Confession – Acknowledging our sins and depending on God for his mercy

Worship – Our lives as living sacrifices – worship is a life style

Celebration – Enjoying and celebrating the true joy that comes from God

Whole Life Stewardship – A life-long process as stewards of his possessions

Conclusion – Reflection on how spiritual disciplines have, and will, change our lives

In the last few months, how have you been able to incorporate spiritual disciplines in your life in a more intentional way? Have you made any new discoveries about yourself and your relationship with God?

In John 14:15-16, Jesus said that if we love him, we are to obey him. When you read over the list of the above disciplines, please share with the group examples of how Jesus demonstrated them in his life. How can we follow in his footsteps in a continued, conscious way? What have you found to be the biggest challenge with living in greater discipline? Take time to pray for one another in this regard, petitioning God for his help and guidance. Also, spend some time in thanksgiving for his love and guidance for us.

In Galatians 2:20 we read Paul's words, "I have been crucified with Christ; and I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the real life I now have within this body is a result of my trusting in the Son of God, who loves me and gave himself for me" (*The Living Bible*). Please share your thoughts about this passage. How has Jesus living in you changed you? If you like, please share in what areas of your life you pray that Jesus continues to change you. Are there ways the group can help you and encourage you? Take time to pray for one another.

How do you think God expects us to share this spiritually disciplined life with others?

The spiritual disciplines are best exercised and lived out in the midst of our ordinary, busy lives, filled with job, family, relationship and church responsibilities. May the disciplines of the spiritual life move us all further and further away from surface living into the true depths of God's heart!

God bless you always!

"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds"

(Hebrews 10:24).

S. Albrecht

About the Authors...

Charles and Susi Albrecht worked for Grace Communion International in the Church Administration and Development department.

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About the publisher...

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[back to table of contents](#)



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[back to table of contents](#)