

# Taking Christian Disciplines Seriously



by Peter Klenner



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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by  
*P. Klenner*

*published by*



Anglican Network  
in Canada

## Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

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Editor

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### **Taking Christian Disciplines Seriously**

Published by  
Anglican Network in Canada  
Box 1013,  
Burlington, ON, Canada, L7R 4L8  
Web: [www.anglicannetwork.ca](http://www.anglicannetwork.ca)  
Email: [info@anglicannetwork.ca](mailto:info@anglicannetwork.ca)  
ISBN: 978-1-897538-04-3

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Printed in Canada.

# Taking Christian Disciplines Seriously

*P. Klenner*

## Introduction

**W**hen Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done,” (Matt. 6:10) he wanted to teach them to realize that in order to follow him, they had to relinquish control of their wills. As Jesus said elsewhere, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23). Jesus himself modeled this process. Thus, on the night before he was murdered, he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Lk. 22:42). Saying “no” to self in order to say “yes” to God, and being willing, like Jesus, and with Jesus, to accept whatever God may will, is the basis of discipleship.

The question for Christians throughout the centuries has been “how do we relinquish control of our wills?” Will power in itself isn’t enough. Many well meaning Christians have attempted to will themselves into “living sacrifices” only to achieve a more subtle form of selfishness. The fathers of the faith have taught us that in order to find that place of sacrificial obedience to God—a place where we can and do truly live in terms of “not my will but thine be done”—we need the help of Christian disciplines. No surprise here, surely? After all, disciples are people who practice discipline!

The danger here, however, is the tendency to fall into legalism. As we practice the disciplines over and over, eventually, if we’re not careful, they will become an end in themselves, rather than a means to the end. We shall get so caught up in the rules, we shall forget why we practice the disciplines in the first place. It is important to remember, therefore, that the goal is not that we might grow in mental astuteness, but rather that we might subordinate our wills to God’s. Our purpose is God’s purpose—our personal transformation. We are not

to rest at the cerebral level, then, but to move on towards the cardiac level. True character change starts in the heart. The *biblical* practice of Christian disciplines does not produce Pharisees, but disciples—people who become more and more like Jesus.

Our purpose here is to introduce you to eight Christian disciplines that you might begin to explore and adopt in your own spiritual walk.

## **1. The Discipline of Reading Scripture**

In the busy world of the 21st century, it seems that everything travels at the speed of light. The use of Blackberries, cell phones, e-mails, web access and satellite feeds, just to mention a few, has marvellously increased the speed at which we access information. Unfortunately, we now tend to approach the reading of holy scripture at the same speed. We come to the bible in a hurry, galloping through a few verses or even chapters before we rush off to work, school, or sleep. “Read the bible in a year,” or “just 30 seconds with God” are catchy phrases used by publishers which, in fact, encourage us to race through scripture as sometimes we race through our meals. The danger is that we shall find ourselves learning *about* God, without actually relating *to* God. It is easy to approach scripture as though we were scanning a newspaper: skimming here, browsing there, noticing the heading on this or that page, and so on. But that is not good enough. We want to get in on what Jesus is doing. In order to do that we have to slow down as we approach the scripture. We have to discipline ourselves to read scripture as holy text not just as another book.

One of the ways of doing this is called Godly Reading, in Latin *Lectio Divina*, practised by the monastics as early as the 5th century A.D. They taught us to read the bible for devotion—to interact with the text—to submit unconditionally to the Word of God. These godly monks teach us the four aspects of *lectio divina*, briefly outlined below.

### ***Lectio* [reading]**

First, we read the scripture—slowly. No rush, no time limit. We simply read, out loud if that helps us to slow down; with emphasis, pausing, underlining the teaching, telling the story. Not like scanning a newspaper, but more like a script being read out aloud at an audition. We take time to enter the story and imagine ourselves part of it. (This

process will need practice because for many of us such involving of ourselves is a foreign concept.)

***Meditatio* [absorbing, and being absorbed]**

We picture ourselves as characters in the story: feeling, seeing, hearing, smelling, speaking. As the words of scripture wash over us we let them pull us into whatever they are about. All the while taking our time. The process cannot be rushed.

***Oratio* [praying]**

Now the text becomes our script. The words of the bible characters become our words, indeed our prayers. We adopt the words of scripture for our own conversation with God. Each word we read prompts a prayer. “Lord.” “Go in peace.” As we thus take time with the text, even simple phrases will leave us with thoughts that can last days.

***Contemplatio* [applying]**

And so the text becomes the prayers which become the challenges to and guidelines for the way we live. We begin to question the text: How should this text affect the way I live today? What is Jesus saying to me through this text? How will it change me? *Contemplatio* leads us towards a reflective response to the story we’ve just entered. Thus, through *Lectio Divina* we continue the journey of discipleship towards transformation.

## **2. The Discipline of Sabbath Keeping**

Busyness, as we have already said, is our number one enemy. That is why the discipline of Sabbath keeping is so important. The world pulls us out of shape. Practicing Sabbath gives us time to reorient our position in the world and realign ourselves with God’s kingdom. But it takes personal discipline to practice Sabbath, and of all the Ten Commandments, keeping the Sabbath is the most neglected. But when Jesus said “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27), he was telling us that the Sabbath has a purpose, and we are to embrace it—it’s for our own good! God gave it to us in order that we might become better and godlier people—more like Jesus himself, in fact. Keeping Sabbath is a transforming practice.

For most of us the Sabbath is Sunday. (Although many clergy practice Sabbath on Mondays.) However, it’s not so much the day we keep, but that we keep the Day as a Day for God. Sabbath is more



about spending time with God than it is about not working. In his inspirational book *The Sabbath* Abraham Heschel says that in order to understand the rest of Sabbath we must first understand the nature of work. Work is necessary. “There is happiness in the love of labour” says Heschel, though “there is misery in the love of gain,” and “labour without dignity is the cause of misery.” We are commanded to work; but we are also commanded to rest. It belongs to our dignity as God’s creatures that we should keep Sabbath.

Sabbath keeping is not so much about not working as about spending time in intimate relationship with God. On Sunday, we discipline ourselves not to be distracted from that relationship. We make an effort to worship with the church every Sunday! We turn off our cell phones and e-mails. We do what it takes! The prophet Isaiah gives us great advice when it come to Sabbath keeping. He says,

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD’S holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob” (Isa. 58:13, 14).

Along with all the other benefits of keeping Sabbath, Isaiah says we will find joy in our Lord.

### **3. The Discipline of Thanksgiving**

Part of St. Paul’s counsel to the Thessalonian Christians was to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:18). This is something easier said than done. It seems much easier to be negative and critical than to be positive and constructive in our speech. For some, sarcasm roles off the tongue without any help. It’s as though our default operating system is to grumble and complain. Certainly, the people of Israel (corresponding to modern Christians) were, in their very nature, a complaining people. No wonder. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jer. 17:9). The very essence of who we are is steeped in sin.

It takes discipline to give thanks in all circumstances. It certainly does not come naturally. One of the great challenges of the Christian life is to develop a “gratitude attitude.” This does not mean that we go

around ignoring the badness of bad things, but that in everything we seek and find a reason to thank God. In fact, if we were to consider all the reasons for which we should thank God, there would be no time left to complain. Learning to thank God in all circumstances, reminds us that God is in control of every situation and that everything is fitting into his plan.

In Luke 17 we read the incident of the ten lepers who approached Jesus to be cleansed. “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” they cried. Jesus told them to show themselves to the priests, and as they did so they were cleansed. Amazingly, only *one* of the men, a Samaritan, came back to thank Jesus for what he had done. Jesus commented on this. The man left with Jesus’s words still ringing in his ears: “Rise and go: your faith has made you well” (Lk. 17:19).

J.C. Ryle, the great 19th century evangelical bishop of Liverpool, in his commentary on this passage makes three astute observations. First, thankfulness is a rare thing. Of ten lepers only one returned to give thanks. Similar ingratitude prevails in society today. As individuals, therefore, we will need to be vigilant and counter-cultural if we are going to maintain a gratitude attitude.

Second, thankfulness is God’s will for us. We’re commanded to be thankful. In the Psalms alone, we are instructed at least twenty times to give thanks to the Lord. We give thanks to God for his righteousness (Ps 7:17), because he has helped us (Ps. 28:7), because his name is near and his deeds are wonderful (Ps. 75:1), because he is good and his love endures forever (Ps. 100:4), for his unfailing love (Ps. 107:8), and so forth. Giving thanks should be the very essence of our existence. True Christian discipleship embraces the transforming power of thankfulness.

Finally, neglect of being thankful can drive us away from God. St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans cautions us by the example of people who knew God, but refused to glorify him as God, or give thanks to him. As a result of this disregard they were relegated to futile thinking and the darkening of their foolish hearts (Rom. 1:21). It stands to reason, that if God commands us to be always thankful, and we act in direct disobedience to that command, we thereby reject God himself. On the contrary, living with a gratitude attitude—in direct obedience to God—will not only keep us disciplined in our Christian walk, but transform us from within. So as St. Paul urges, let us give thanks in all circumstances (Eph. 5:20; Col. 1:12, 2:17, 3:17, 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:18).



#### 4. The Discipline of Practicing the Presence of God

A fact to face—a happy fact—is that God is always with us. Although we may *theologically* believe this, many Christians don't *actually* live it. I often hear phrases like “let's come to God in prayer” or “let's enter into his presence” which suggest to me non-realization that if God is omnipresent then he is already everywhere! There is no place where God is not. The psalmist says, “where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Ps. 139:7). Of course the answer is “nowhere!” The challenge however is to recognize his presence everywhere all day long, even when we don't feel it. Rather than saying, “let's enter God's presence” we should say “let's recognize the presence of God amongst us.”

The letters of the 17th century Carmelite lay brother named Nicolas Herman help us here. We know him better as Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. He was given charge of the kitchen of his monastery, where he led a life of almost constant recollection of God. His writings recommend a form of prayer consisting in the simple practice of the presence of God, whether by the imagination or by the intellect.

Brother Lawrence says that before we can love God, we have to know him; you can't love what you don't know. Therefore, in order to know God, we must think of him often. This takes practice—discipline. We have to train our minds to be conscious of the fact that God is with us all the time. Brother Lawrence reminds us that it is our business in life to please God. Everything we do, whether in word or deed, we are to do in the name of our Lord Jesus (Col. 3:16). Everything we eat or drink, we do it all for the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31). For Brother Lawrence, running the monastery kitchen, work and prayer were inseparable. He prayed as he worked, he worked as he prayed.

God is profoundly present in the ordinary things of life. We must not be misled into thinking that God is not present when we're cleaning the toilet, digging trenches, or picking up garbage. We all know what it is to sense something greater than ourselves. This often occurs when we view nature. It's not difficult to recognize God's presence when we see the Canadian Rocky Mountains or look up at the stars of the Milky Way in the middle of the Nullarbor Plain in central Australia. Even a sunset viewed from the back yard, a tall tree, or an eagle flying overhead can cause us to realize afresh the reality of God.

Now our task, Brother Lawrence tells us, is to cherish that realization always and everywhere.

To recognize God's presence all the time takes practice and discipline. We must learn to believe (in spite of how we feel) that God is always with us, and that he loves us unconditionally. Even when we sin, he still loves us. He is still with us. He loved us long before we knew him. The apostle John tells us that we love God, because he first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19). And his presence with us is an abiding fact.

The more we think of God, the God of the gospel who sent his Son to save us, the more we shall know and love him and the more habitual it will become to recognize his presence all day long. Psychologists tell us that if we maintain a practice for thirty days it becomes a habit. Our habits define our character, and our character is who we are. By *thinking* about God consistently, we *become* people who walk in grateful, responsive obedience to his commands. Obedience to God proves that we love him and shows that we acknowledge his presence.

In our practice of the presence of God, we must be careful to watch out for distractions that lead us away from steadiness in what we are doing. Brother Lawrence says that the undisciplined mind is a source for many distractions. He also implies that silence—a state we often avoid—is where God speaks to us loudly and where we need to be listening most carefully. Whatever our situation in life, then, we can know that God is all around us, even when we don't feel him, and to work at practising his presence will lead us into the transformative life of a disciple.

## **5. The Discipline of Prayer**

Another discipline essential in the quiver of our spiritual practice arrows is prayer. If practicing the presence of God is like the resin of a two-part glue, then prayer is the hardener. St. Paul tells us that we should pray continually (pray without ceasing, 1 Thess. 5:17 KJV). Practicing the presence of God and praying without ceasing go hand in hand; they complement each other. We need the discipline of the one to do the other. Again, praying without ceasing takes practice. Obviously, praying like this means we don't close our eyes! In fact, in order to pray without ceasing there are several things we need to understand.

First, we must grasp that Jesus is already praying for us. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus, in his role as priest forever in the

order of Melchizedek, is able to save us completely because he always lives to intercede for us (Heb. 7:25). In other words Jesus is always praying for us, and when we pray we must realize that all our prayers are themselves the first stage of an answer to his prayers. We are responding to his prayer for us, that we might be persons who are always praying with him for their own and others' real needs. As with salvation, Jesus began the prayer process. We just follow his lead.

Second, we must realize that prayer implies communication, but not necessarily in words, and certainly not in formal speeches. Non-verbal, incoherent and verbally inadequate communication is an everyday fact of human life, and so it is when we address God. When we pray we don't have to pray out loud. God hears our thoughts. He knows them even before we consciously think them. He knows our heart's desires, our struggles, and yes, even our sins. The challenge is to recognize that God hears us even when we don't manage to articulate our thoughts in a formal way in words.

By definition, communication is a two-way street. Therefore, listening to God is as important as (dare I say more important than!) talking to God. The first thing Jesus did after his baptism as the formal entrance into his ministry here on earth was to listen to God, who spoke to him from heaven and said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Jesus listened to God. When the great prophet Elijah was listening for the voice of God, we read that the Lord was not in the great and powerful wind; he was not in the earthquake, and he was not in the fire; God's voice came in a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:11, 12). To hear God speak, then we have to be in "listening mode." Sometimes his voice is subtle. If we are going to pray without ceasing we will have to learn the art of listening to God.

Finally, we have to realize that prayer is a form of existence. It's a way of living. Praying without ceasing is like breathing; it becomes a part of everything we say and do. A constant consciousness—always aware of God's presence with us and Christ's intercessions for us. Always listening for God's whisper. Sometimes waiting and serving in silence—praying in secret; sometimes persevering in prayer during great turmoil. At whatever place in life we find ourselves we realize that we are not alone. The Father and the Son, through the Spirit, are walking with us in conversation. We respond.

When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, he taught them what

has become known as the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13). More accurately, it should be called the "Disciples' Prayer," because Jesus taught it to them for them to use for their own benefit. This prayer displays three aspects of praying as a lifestyle. First, we recognize our Father in heaven. Just this word, with its reminder of the mercy of our adoption, following the mercy of our justification through the cross, like the word "Lord," has implications which could keep us occupied for the rest of our lives. Second, we relinquish our wills to God when we say, "your kingdom come, your will be done." We place ourselves under his lordship. Third, we recognize our total dependence on him. Everything we need in order to live (bread, and the daily pardon of our sins, the destruction of our sinful habits, and our protection from evil in all its forms), are out of our reach but in his gift. If God doesn't come through we're finished! There is no "plan B." A life of praying without ceasing is a life that acknowledges total dependence on God—for everything!

## **6. The Discipline of Obedience**

During the middle ages when monasteries were thriving, a garment commonly worn by monks was the cincture, a rope around their waist. Into their cincture they would tie three knots, representing the three vows they made when they entered the monastery: the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. The monastery was obviously set up for chastity and poverty but the knot for obedience was a needed reminder to the monks that they had relinquished control of their wills to God. This vow required inner discipline if it was to be followed. The modern Christian faces the same challenge. Although we don't wear a cincture, we too have relinquished control of our wills to God and must now live that out. Obedience to God is the very essence of what it means to be a Christian.

At the very heart of the biblical message is the call to obedience. The apostle John commands us to "walk in obedience" to Jesus' commands (2 Jn. 6). On numerous occasions Jesus said that if we would love him, we would obey him (Jn. 14:15, 23, 24; 15:10). It is an oxymoron, indeed a contradiction in terms to say "disobedient disciple." If we are disciples of Christ, then we have already undertaken that we will obey him no matter what the cost. Obedience, however, does not come easily. First, it has to be decided on in the mind. Second, it has to be established as a priority in the will. Finally, it has to be applied

in life. All this takes discipline—resolution and practice. Without obedience, however, the Christian life is impossible.

Once Christians have come to grips with the fact that by very definition they have relinquished control of their will to God, then the rest of their life is about determining what God's will and purposes are. Paul's guidance to the Romans is good advice. He says that if we don't conform to the pattern of this world, but are transformed by the renewing of our minds, then we will be able to discern and approve what God's perfect will is (Rom. 12:2). In other words, if we practice the spiritual disciplines, all of which by nature are counter-cultural practices, then we'll find that we know what God wants us to do. God wants our lives to be different from those of the people around us. Jesus will help us in this; we look to him as our model. Jesus, who was totally human learned obedience from what he suffered (Heb. 5:8). He knew by experience what it costs to obey God. If Jesus learned obedience then we can and must learn obedience. Remember that God is sovereign and we can be confident about his competence to handle our affairs. His hands will never let us go, even when we lose our grip! (Ps. 37:24).

## **7. The Discipline of Relationship**

Two things last forever: the Word of God and the souls of people. Accordingly, the two greatest investments a person can make in life for the kingdom of God are to study the scriptures and to love people. Nothing is more important. Everything we take on in life—our work, our hobbies, our ministries, our responsibilities etc.—should be used as a means to embody and express the truths of holy scripture, and to develop relationship with people, at whatever level is appropriate.

Jesus' command is to "love your neighbour(s) as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). To this there are two dimensions: the capacity to love our neighbours, and the capability to love ourselves. In order to love people we have to understand love from God's perspective. We call this "agapé" love—God's unconditional love for all people, as seen in the fact that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). St. John tells us that God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). Therefore, the better we know God, the better we will understand love. St. Paul defines this agapé love in his first letter to the Corinthians. He says that love is patient and kind, it does not envy or boast, it is not proud, rude, self-seeking or easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs, does not

delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth, it always protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres (1 Cor. 13:4–7). An important feature of all these love characteristics is that they do not involve feelings. They are qualities that we choose to practice. They are not based on intelligence or ability, but on a decision of the will. Agapé love does not require warm gushy feelings, nor does it necessarily need words. Agapé love is action of the will.

A moving example of agapé love is Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. A Jewish man fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him for dead on the side of the road. A priest and a teacher of the law passed by and ignored the man, but a despised Samaritan bandaged his wounds and took him to an inn to take care of him (Luke 10: 30–34). It is not recorded what the Samaritan said—indeed, he didn't have to say anything; he personified the cliché that actions speak louder than words.

If we're going to understand the discipline of relationship, then we also need to know how to love ourselves. This takes us into dangerous territory. The world in which we live has distorted and defiled God's concept of self-love. God's model of self-love is all about giving; God gratifies himself by his generosity. The world's concept of self-love is all about receiving, gratifying oneself by what one gets, indeed by what one takes. God's self-love looks outward, centring on the needy other, while worldly self-love looks only inward, focusing totally on the greedy self. If however we understand how we are to love our neighbour, then we can get a clue as to how we should love ourselves. The most loving thing we can do for our neighbours is to introduce them to the risen Christ, and then help them live a life of intimacy with him. Indeed, this is the central message of the Great Commission which defines the purpose of every Christian disciple (Matt. 28:18–20). If that is how we are to love others, then we should match that in our own lives. The most loving thing we can do for ourselves is to seek Christ, to love him intimately, and to serve him unconditionally. Only a disciple who is committed to relationship is capable of what Jesus' commands, i.e., to love God, our neighbour and ourselves.

## **8. The Discipline of Finances**

It may seem strange that a book on Christian disciplines would include a section on finances. However, the way we handle money



reflects our priorities in life. We live in a materialistic world, so it should not surprise us that money has the tendency to become an alternative god to Yahweh. Jesus reminds us that we can only have one god in our lives—God or Money! He said, “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Lk. 16:13). And surely he was right: experience decides.

The *love* of money will cause grief in our lives. It is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people eager for money, says Paul, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Tim. 6:10). Two characteristics of the modern Christian’s financial habits are cause for concern here. First is the enormous debt (especially credit card debt) into which Christians have enmeshed themselves. Being in such debt makes it impossible to serve God without being constantly limited by financial restrictions, which prevents us from going, giving, and growing. The book of Proverbs is full of aphorisms which warn about being in debt. If we are going to live as disciples of Christ who have relinquished control of our wills to him, we must learn how to live within our means. Second is the feeble giving habits of many western Christians. I am constantly amazed at how little wealthy North Americans give in relation to our brothers and sisters in Africa. An American pastor offered to travel to Rwanda and teach the church there the principles of tithing and how to give ten percent. The local Rwandan pastor politely told the American pastor not to come to Rwanda, because he would encourage the African church to give ten percent. At present, he said, they give thirty percent! Sacrificial Christianity implies sacrificial giving. This is a discipline that has to be learned.

Several attitudes to finances can encourage our Christian journey. To begin, we must understand that all money belongs to God. All silver and all gold are his (Hag. 2:8), whatever we have has been given to us by God. Not all are called to a life of riches, but that is a relative term for those who live in North America. Even poor people drive cars here in Canada! Solomon, the writer of the Proverbs, has given us good counsel for God’s design to increase our relative wealth. The first principle is to work. He says that all hard work brings a profit (Prov. 14:23). There is nothing more rewarding than to earn an honest income for an honest day’s hard work. Second, he instructs us to save. He says that in the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but that a foolish man devours all he has (Prov. 21:20). Wise

people save a little of whatever they earn. Third, if we are to prosper, says Solomon, we must plan. Riches do not endure for ever, and so we need to study the condition of our flocks, to ensure future economic viability with what we have (Prov. 27:23-27). In modern-speak that's called budgeting. Finally, we are instructed to give. The salient point regarding wealth is not how much we've earned, or saved, but how much we've given. I've met many wealthy business people who, in some Christian circles, have been criticized because of their wealth. Obviously, what their critics didn't know is just how much these business people gave away. In one cheque one business man gave more than I would be able to give in a whole life time. Proverbs says that a generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. He will also be blessed, because he shares his food with the poor (Prov. 11:25, 22:9).

Giving money is a spiritual discipline. We've already mentioned that all money comes from God. We are merely stewards of it. He gives it to us, in order that we may use it as he has planned for us to do. The New Testament advocates several principles on how to give our money. However, before we give anything of what we *have*, St. Paul instructs us through the example of the Macedonians that we are first to give *ourselves* to the Lord (2 Cor. 8:5). Our first priority as disciples is to give ourselves to him.

St. Paul instructs Timothy, his son in the faith, to command those who are rich in this present world, not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth. We are, says St. Paul, to put our hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment (1 Tim 6:17). If our hope is in God then we can give in a purposeful and systematic way. To the Corinthian church, St. Paul gave these instructions: On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income (1 Cor. 16:2). In the book of Acts, Luke records that the first Christians in Jerusalem sold their possessions and goods, and gave to those who had need (Acts 2:45). (Note: they did not sell all their possessions at once, but sold them according to need.) Another aspect of our giving is that it should be sacrificial. Giving should cost us something. However, we're not to give reluctantly or under compulsion. To the Corinthians, St. Paul says that each person should give what they have decided in their heart to give, because God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). Finally, we should recognise that, in the words of Dr. John McArthur, "giving is not God's

way of raising *money*; giving is God's way of raising *children*." The disciplined use of money, finances, and wealth is a means by which God grows and nurtures us into maturity. As we give control of our finances to God, our will goes with them.

### **Conclusion**

If we are going to take our faith journey seriously, and to follow our Lord's instructions, then we have to relinquish control of our wills to him. Without the disciplines of the Christian life we can't become disciples. Self control and a strong will are not enough. The Church triumphant has taught us that disciplines keep our hearts and minds in the love of God. I pray that you might find the courage and strength to explore these disciplines of the Christian faith as you journey with him. Remember, they are a means to an end, not the end in themselves. Their sole purpose is to bring Christ-like transformation. May you walk in the joy of our Lord, as you continue to serve him.



## Questions for Study and Discussion

1. When you read the scripture, do you skim the surface, or do you enter the text? Do you need to change at this point? If so, how?
2. Have you ever led anyone to Christ or disciplined anyone? Why/why not? What would you need in order for you to do that?
3. Do you keep Sabbath in any form? If not, what reasons do you give for not doing so? What would have to happen in your life in order for you to keep Sabbath?
4. Is giving thanks in all circumstances easy for you? Why/why not?
5. How do you go about practicing the presence of God?
6. Describe how you pray. Do you pray without ceasing? Why/why not?
7. On a level from one to ten, how serious are you regarding obedience to God? Explain.
8. How hard do you work at relationships? What struggles do you have in relationships? What joys?
9. What is your attitude to money? How would you assess your Christian giving?

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