

Spiritual Disciplines for the Field

By Nairy A. Ohanian

A healthy spiritual life is vital for all disciples of Christ. We know that vibrancy does not simply happen by walking day in day out as a Christian or attending church, it is developed and worked at. Spiritual maturity is best achieved through disciplines practiced over time. Naturally everyone gets pulled, pushed, beaten and challenged in the spiritual battle. But for missionary workers, there seems to be an extra challenge. Desire and desperation often gnaw at our hungry souls & we wonder if God will ever show up again.

Matthew 11:28-30 is heard in a fresh and wonderful manner in *The Message* translation of the Scriptures:

Are you tired? Worn Out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me & you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me- watch how I do it. I learnt the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Aren't those words wonderfully inviting and desirous? To live so freely and lightly seems too good to be true. How can the demands of the mission field yield such a life? It is possible but as the verse says...walk with me and work with me. Such intimacy and rest is work initially but eventually it is freedom and renewal.

WHAT are unique challenges for a missionary's spiritual life?

Busyness, isolation, constant spiritual warfare, and pressures of ministry can become a serious danger and threat to weaken the strength of field workers. Often the work or ministry takes first priority and self feeding easily takes second or last priority. Back home, all full time ministers of the gospel share similar challenges in sacrificing self for the sake of others but on the field, there is an even greater possibility for neglect. Some of the reasons why include:

- 1- We have come farther, there are great costs, we must give our all
- 2- The work is often endless, laborers fewer, the needs enormous
- 3- Little accountability, normal support or accountability is not near
- 4- Justify by saying "it is only for a season", a short time, but then relief never comes
- 5- Expectations from financial/prayer supporters and churches to not ease up
- 6- Twisted definition of suffering, hardship, what missionaries "do"
- 7- False sense of all things dependent on the worker, esp. if pioneering
- 8- Not sure who or what to turn to for support or help

- 9- Spiritual props from back home not available, as Christian radio, books
10- And please add your own reason...

Because all the above suggest circumstances which are out of control, constant, and powerful demands, spiritual disciplines are all the more vital to instill in one's life.

What are Spiritual Disciplines?

This word actually translates to rule or regulation; the early church saw them as intentional practices to help in the desire for more of God.

A simple definition... that which fosters More of God!

The rhythm of disciplines for the first believers would be Acts 2:42... "They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, & prayer...." Throughout the early church the disciples weaved in their lives stewardship, chastity, fasting, prayer, humility, etc. Some notes about disciplines. One, they are set, made choices which we stick to as priority. They are not decided at the moment.

Secondly, they are commitments, or covenants, so they are not negotiable or optional, you have already agreed to them as promises already made. And thirdly, they are repeated actions which are habit forming, and actually become hard to live without.

Whose responsibility is a missionary's spiritual growth?

Because missionaries have stresses unlike those back home or unique from the average disciple of Christ, clearly a need for support from others to encourage or assist is necessary. Team leaders, mission agencies, home churches, supporters, all have a role to play, to encourage, and help prioritize. BUT ultimately missionaries need to feed and grow ourselves. Just like exercising, only the individual can get on the machines, lift the weights, put in time and sweat it out. Coaches can encourage one to go to the gym, others can buy us nice workout clothes, equipment, even come with us, but we have to work out ourselves. A related question arises in asking, are spiritual disciplines a private, personal issue handled alone or are they communal practices?

The answer is both and. Just like our entire spiritual live, God speaks and deals and ministers individually to us but we also live that reality in community, within a Body. Some teachers like to divide spiritual disciplines into such a divide such as theologian/professor Dallas Willard. He speaks of "engagement and abstinence".

Some things are done in a group of others and some on our own. Often we will experience seasons in which our disciplines are of a more communal nature and other times more private. But yes we need relationships and partners in the area of spiritual growth.

Foundational Spiritual Disciplines for Missionaries on the Field:

1- Spiritual friendships locally- specifically an accountability /prayer partner

When moving to a new city, even when temporarily back in one's home town, the first priority must be; who is available to meet with me on a regular basis. Ideally this should be a weekly meeting, but if not possible than every other week. A partner helps us keep our spiritual maintenance and growth. This can include a national or expatriate, but it must be someone you can be honest with and open. Mutual sharing is a must where the missionary does not feel he/she is only giving.

The partner could be a team mate but you need to be able to be honest and open with your struggles and the work and thus a person outside the team is best.

2- Place to worship, be with other believers

This is actually easier said than done on the field as many missionaries are church planting and church is constantly a place of service, ministry, giving. Second the issue of language is a challenge. Do you even understand the service? Often church is more of a language class than a worship day. There are no easy answers. Be flexible and creative until you find a fit. Maybe the worker must go to both a national church and afterwards to an international or English church.

Maybe team meetings will be your only place of worship, gathering with other believers till you feel comfortable in a national church.

Another option is to meet with other believers but receive English sermons from back home for feeding. Even when you understand the local language and sermon it may be very pretty basic and not as nurturing. Also what must be an emphasis is an opportunity to worship. For a season worship may mean CD's from home, a hymnal, an instrument you play, a walk through creation, your Bible reading of the Psalms; whatever brings you to a posture of worship the Living God.

3- Feed your Soul by the Word

Daily scripture study, as well as devotional reading, a quiet time, whatever you know as a regular time in the word of God. This is not a time to prepare a team meeting or a Bible study but a personal, "no agenda but feed my own soul"

time. This is time with an open and honest heart in the Word, to receive from God.

Using a study guide, some structure, is usually helpful. A book study, helps to know what you will do when you sit down and not be distracted by random flipping. Being intentional and knowing what you want to study is much more motivating for Scripture study.

Scripture memorization can be part of this time as well.

4- Prayer

Mostly on the field we find we are interceding for all the lost around us, for the needs, the ministry, etc. This type of prayer is critical but your prayer life cannot stop there. Set times for different types of prayer. Be creative in where you pray what sorts of prayers; at home, prayer walks, walks around your city, your block, on Sundays, wherever. Then decide on intercessory prayer, prayer through scripture, prayer for the world, prayer for your host nation, prayer for specific people and more. Stay fresh in your prayer life! Use liturgical prayers or a prayer book. Above all try listening and reflective prayer: breath prayer, and contemplative prayer are options.

5- Sabbath Rest one day a week

This is perhaps one of the most positive and beneficial disciplines for a missionary. A Weekly Sabbath day is a twenty four hour period that is special and set aside. It reminds us we are finite; we cannot constantly be on the go. We declare that there are limits to our energy. Our Jewish brothers and sisters are the best with this practice until now. Sure for some it has turned into legalism, but it is a day for delight and refreshment for many. It is a day of trust! God I trust you to handle everything on your own...God you can do it. You do not need us. This is not a non-ministry day to catch up on laundry, errands, or paying bills. It is refreshment between God and my soul. It does not mean you must read your Bible all day or journal but it can include a variety of activities; sports, tennis, music, cooking something for fun, painting, fun emails, letters, photo albums, art museums, walks by the seaside, naps and much more. Usually a balance of a directly spiritual activity along with a non-spiritual activity is most restorative. Also here a balance of communal time and a private time works best.

6- Extended Retreat time

This can be once a month, or once every 3 months. The time depends on your location or ministry schedule. It is best to set the time and then let it get bumped or negotiated than not set the time at all. Again this is for refreshment but also includes a time of evaluation, processing, decision making, next steps, or goal

setting. Some ideal times are at the end of the ministry year, at New Years, at the end of summer, or on your Birthday.

7- Journaling and reflection

This is a time to ask yourself questions. It helps to create a list of regular reflection questions:

What have I learned this last month?

Am I changing? How am I growing?

What are my goals?

Where am I headed? Where do I want to be in a years' time?

What is a new spiritual truth I uphold? What new characteristic of God is significant for me?

Where am I in my spiritual journey? Have I hit a wall?

8- Sitting and Silence

Allow you self to sit in a park, on a balcony, in a chapel, in a mall, and watch the world. Try to not do any activity and not feel guilty. Try not to mentally plan your day or week and just take in what is around you. Watch the world. This is so hard for most missionaries with their extremely high work and produce ethic. It is a wonderful discipline to slow down and then observe, and imagine people's lives; who they, where they have been. Sit in silence and then gradually pray over what you observed, who you saw. Start to dream and imagine. We are instructed to be still and know that He is God. Listen and wait upon God. Here too is another discipline, to wait.

9- Celebration: God celebrates. He invented delight, joy, and laughter.

Life on the mission field is often hard, but we must intentionally think of celebratory times. It is interesting how we do this with our kids when they win a soccer game, get an A in spelling. Let's celebrate we declare.

This is tied to the discipline of gratitude and thanksgiving. Thank offerings unto the Lord are encouraged. Being thankful for people in your life and ministry can be celebratory. You can write a thank you to someone, throw a party, write a song, cook a festive meal and celebrate. Or simply think of a hardship and look for the presence of God in it and thank Him.

Some closing tips on disciplines:

- 1- You will not master them all over night. Work up to them.
- 2- Pick one or two for a term that you will focus upon.

- 3- Legalism and guilt are not helpful. God is after your heart so extend grace to yourself when you falter.
- 4- Think of a journey which starts, keeps moving forward and takes time.
- 5- Do some disciplines in community and some do alone. Memorizing, prayer walks, celebrations, can hopefully be with another, while silence, prayer, scripture can be alone.
- 6- Keep in mind your personality and how you are wired. Again there is no need for guilt, or comparison as everyone is slightly different in nature. Know yourself before you commit to disciplines, and discuss them with friends who know you and can help you make choices.

May you enjoy the spiritual journey of disciplines which will renew and sustain you on the field of your mission!