

Part Two: “Purposeful Planning Produces”

Before the Christian disciple starts firing at the targets of spiritual discipline, he must be ready, and he must take careful aim. Indeed, he needs to know just what his targets are! And so enters the indispensable matters of intentionality and planning. As the apostle Paul describes in I Corinthians 9:26, he doesn't run aimlessly; he doesn't box as if he were beating mere air. No, his passionate desire to pursue godliness moves him to organize his priorities, strategies, and sacrificial efforts to reach the goals God has set before him.

“Just as we consider a prayer list an indispensable help to effective and ongoing intercession, so too do Claire and I keep individual journals, make weekly and daily to-do lists, and arrange regular slots in our schedules for Bible study, fellowship, and service. Planning one's actions is crucial to successfully getting them done.”

Taking the responsibility to plan is underscored in several of the proverbs. “The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage” (Proverbs 21:5a); “Commit your works to the Lord and your plans will be established” (Proverbs 16:3); and “Without consultation, plans are frustrated but with many counselors they will succeed” (Proverbs 15:22). Of course, our plans are always to be made with humility, wisdom, in keeping with God's overall will, and with earnest dependence on the Spirit to work His purposes in (and beyond) them. Many other proverbs remind us of God's overreaching control of our lives; nevertheless, a study of the book

clearly reveals that we are given a responsibility to cooperate with God in making careful plans to pursue godliness.

The biblical metaphors are quite clear in this matter. The athlete plans, the farmer plans, and so does the king, commander, shepherd, craftsman, priest, and so on. And the disciple must make plans too -- plans that are accompanied by a commitment to follow them through as God oversees and empowers.

Let me share an illustration of how planning works. Every Christmas season Claire and I mix into the myriad of our Yuletide activities the making of New Year's Resolutions. Those resolutions are prayerful plans within several categories of our life and ministry: Bible reading, prayer, purposefulness in friendship, diet and exercise, personal correspondence, thanksgiving, reading, family, home projects, Vital Signs Ministries projects, church involvement, giving, and a few more. But we're not done with simply making resolutions; we also do quarterly evaluations of each one in order to grade our progress, make adjustments, and re-dedicate ourselves to the vows we've made to God and to each other.

Why be so organized, so thorough? Simple; it's because we have learned the profound truth of the old adage, “If you aim at nothing, you're sure to hit it!” However, if one is more purposeful, more careful, and more invested in making his whole life a faithful stewardship for his King, there will be greater success, consistency, and joy in one's spiritual disciplines. In other words, planning produces.

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Now it must also be emphasized that before one can take an effective aim at spiritual disciplines, he must be ready to diligently pursue them. The believer in Christ must truly want to become a disciple. He or she must have an authentic desire to grow, to be better equipped, to be more effective in their spiritual pilgrimage. There’s no use in planning disciplines if you’re not ready to live completely submitted to God...if you’re not willing to be trained to win the race He has set before you.

Are you going to hang on to encumbrances and entangling sins (Hebrews 12:1)? Then you’ll not be a true disciple. Are you hoping to just do enough to “get by”? Then you’re sure to drift backward rather than move forward. Are you insistent on

bearing the name of “disciple” while refusing to bear the responsibility to sacrifice, to put on the armor of God and serve as Christ’s warrior, to bravely serve the cause of the Spirit rather than the desires of your flesh? Then you will certainly remain as you are -- a disciple in name only. You’ll not be a loyal ambassador whose future includes the gracious (and glorious) rewards the King desires to bestow on His faithful servants. So, don’t miss out on your wonderful opportunity!

So, how does one get ready? Where does the inspiration come to go deeper and further in one’s adventure with the Lord? The answer, of course, is the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives as He enlightens, convicts, corrects, and draws us into the Word of God. That’s where our hearts will be quickened and our minds instructed regarding the “stuff” of spiritual disciplines. And, don’t fret about it; the Holy Spirit will do that drawing through many means -- in your Bible reading and study, the hearing of a sermon, the reading of a book, the testimony of another brother and sister, a heady success, a terrible failure, and so on. He is our Teacher Who, in innumerable ways, opens to us the possibilities of growing in Christ.

As I mentioned, oftentimes it is a crisis that reveals our need for correction, for greater depth of purpose, for more intense effort. For instance, there’s nothing like a doctor’s x-ray showing a spot on one’s lung to create a motivation for the discipline to stop smoking! But it’s always best to be motivated to change our attitudes, priorities, and habits towards holy standards before a crisis requires it.

After the question of readiness, comes the importance of taking careful aim at spiritual disciplines -- choosing your targets and zeroing in. In other words, it’s time to make plans. Did you know that the Hebrew and Greek words translated as “plan” appear over 200 hundred times in Holy Scripture? God was a planner. Joseph and Moses and Joshua and Nehemiah and David

and Daniel and Luke and Paul were planners. And Jesus' disciples, including you and me, are instructed to plan. Don't beat the air. Don't be double-minded. Count the cost. Invest in heaven's treasures. Be wise as serpents. Don't run aimlessly. And on and on.

So as you consider the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, giving, prayer, service, Bible study, thanksgiving, fasting and feasting, memorization, meditation, and so on, take careful aim. Consider your options, talk to mentors and fellow pilgrims. Bring your needs before God in prayer. And then begin to act, but with a humble, honest acceptance of the need to evaluate and adapt as you go.