

The Dangerous Life of the Spirit

by Richard J. Foster

In *The Imitation of Christ* Thomas à Kempis says, "The life of a good man must be mighty in virtues, that he should be inwardly what he appears outwardly to others." We need God's life and light to transform our inner spirit so that righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit begin to pervade all we are and think. But such purity of heart does not just fall on our heads. We need to go through a process of sowing to the Spirit, through the exercise of the classical Disciplines of the spiritual life. As Elizabeth O'Connor has said, "no person or group or movement has vigor and power unless it is disciplined." We must take up a consciously chosen course of action which places us before God in such a way that he can work the righteousness of the Kingdom into us.

These Spiritual Disciplines concern both group and individual life. They include both inward and outward experiences. Through *meditation* we come to hear God's voice and obey his word. *Prayer* is the life of perpetual communion. *Fasting* is one means through which we open our spirits to the Kingdom of God and concentrate upon the work of God. Through the spiritual experience of *study* the mind takes on the order and rhythm of whatever it concentrates upon. These inward disciplines are joined by outward disciplines. *Simplicity*, the life characterized by singleness of purpose, sets us free from the tyranny of ourselves, the tyranny of other people and the tyranny of material possessions. *Solitude* invites us to enter the recreating silences and let go of our inner compulsions. Through the liberating discipline of *submission* we can lay aside the burden of always needing to get our own way. In *service* we can experience the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves which in the end bring resurrection and life. Finally, disciplined living also includes important corporate experiences. *Confession* is that gracious provision of God through which the wounds of sin may be healed. *Worship* ushers us into the Holy of Holies where we can see the Lord high and lifted up. Through the corporate discipline of *guidance* we can know in our own experience the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. *Celebration* offers the wonderful, hilarious, exuberant experience of walking and leaping and praising God.

These Disciplines of the spiritual life can be for us a means of receiving God's grace. They put us in a place where we can experience inner transformation as a gift. But there are pitfalls that can

hinder our way. That is why I often speak of the Disciplines as the dangerous life of the Spirit. We must be diligent to avoid these pitfalls. Perhaps some advance warning will help. I would like to mention seven for you, although there are no doubt many more.

I.

The first pitfall is the temptation to make a law of the Disciplines. There is nothing that can choke the heart and soul out of walking with God like legalism. The rigid person is not the disciplined person. Rigidity is the most certain sign that the Disciplines have spoiled. The disciplined person is the person who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. The disciplined person is the person who can live appropriately in life. Jean-Pierre de Caussade put it so well: "the soul light as a feather, fluid as water, responds to the initiative of divine grace like a floating balloon."

Consider the story of Hans the tailor. Because of his reputation, an influential entrepreneur visiting the city ordered a tailor-made suit. But when he came to pick up this suit, the customer found that one sleeve twisted that way and the other this way; one shoulder bulged out and the other caved in. He pulled and struggled and finally, wrenched and contorted, he managed to make his body fit. As he returned home on the bus, another passenger noticed his odd appearance and asked if Hans the tailor had made the suit. Receiving an

We can in relative safety discuss the Disciplines in the abstract. But to step out into experience threatens us at the core of our being.

affirmative reply, the man remarked, "Amazing! I knew that Hans was a good tailor, but I had no idea he could make a suit fit so perfectly someone as deformed as you." Often that is just what we do in the church. We get some idea of what the Christian faith should look like: then we push and shove people into the most grotesque configurations until they fit wonderfully! That is death. It is a wooden legalism which destroys the soul.

Often my students who are working on the Spiritual Disciplines will keep a journal. When I read those journals I frequently must counsel the students to quit trying so hard to be religious. Let go a little bit! The Disciplines are a grace as well as a Discipline. There is an ease, a naturalness that flows as we walk with God. Some people are not ready for certain Disciplines, and so should be kept from doing them. We should never encourage each other to embrace the Disciplines

Richard J. Foster is Associate Professor of Theology and Writer in Residence at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. This material, adapted from a recent lecture, will also be included in his Study Guide for Celebration of Discipline, forthcoming from Harper & Row.

until there is an internal readiness.

The best way to keep the Spiritual Disciplines from becoming law is to show forth that inward spirit of freedom within us. As we model the life of righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit, people will be attracted. They will be drawn into the most rigorous experiences of spiritual exercises without deadly legalism. Jesus was a man of spiritual discipline, but his life did not put people in bondage. It set them free. The same is true for Paul and Peter and all the Saints. One cannot read *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* or *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* without being caught up in their sense of joy and freedom. We must remember that the Spiritual Disciplines are perceptions into life, not regulations for controlling life.

II.

The second pitfall is the failure to understand the social implications of the Disciplines. The Disciplines are not a set of pious exercises for the devout. They are trumpet call to a freely gathered martyr people who know now the life and powers of the Kingdom of God. We are called to holy obedience in a sin wracked world. The Disciplines call us to wage peace in a world obsessed with war, to plead for justice in a world plagued by inequity, to stand with the poor and disinherited in a world where the neighbor is forgotten. We are to engage in the Lamb's war against sin in every area. This war is waged on all fronts at once—personal, social, institutional. Where have we gotten this foolish division of things spiritual and things secular? The life of disciplined obedience reaches into every sphere of human existence. We are called to attack evil wherever it is found, using all of the weapons available to us consistent with Ephesians 6. As James Naylor put it, Christ "puts spiritual weapons into our hearts and hands to make war with his enemies." We "conquer, not as the prince of this world . . . with whips and prisons, tortures and torments . . . But with the word of truth . . . returning love for hatred, wrestling with God against the enmity, with prayers and tears night and day, with fasting, mourning and lamentation, in patience, in faithfulness, in truth, in love unfeigned, in long-suffering, and in all of the fruits of the Spirit, that if by any means we may overcome evil with good."

III.

The third pitfall is to view the Disciplines as virtuous in themselves. In and of themselves, the Disciplines have absolutely no virtue whatsoever. They will not make us righteous. They will not give us any brownie points with God. They do absolutely nothing except place us before God. This was the central truth the Pharisees failed to see. They thought their disciplines could somehow make them righteous. So fasting, for instance, could become the key. It is this mistake that causes people to turn the Disciplines into a legalism. When we embrace a system, we have a hoop we can hold out for other people to jump through. But once we see that the Disciplines do not make us righteous, then we are free from all such systems. The function of the Disciplines is simply to place us before God. With that they reach the end of their usefulness. The righteousness of the Kingdom of God is then a gift which comes to us.

IV.

A fourth and similar pitfall is to center on the Disciplines rather than on Christ. The Disciplines are for the purpose of realizing a greater good. One cannot play the game of soccer without rules, but the rules are not the game. I do not spend all day reading the rules of soccer and consider that a wonderful experience. The joy comes from playing the game. The rules of soccer are for the purpose of helping us realize the greater good which is the experience of the game itself. The Spiritual Disciplines are for the purpose of realizing the greater good which is the encounter with Christ himself. We must always focus our attention upon Christ rather than the Disciplines. It is not wrong to study and experiment with the Disciplines as long as we always remember that they are only leading us into the reality. The Disciplines are a means of grace to lead us into the grace itself.

V.

A fifth pitfall is the tendency to isolate or elevate one Discipline and exclude or neglect the others. When I received the sample printing of the cover for *Celebration of Discipline*, I died inside. I learned for the first time that the subtitle chosen by the publisher was "Paths to Spiritual Growth." Immediately I wrote a detailed letter in response, saying, essentially, "you missed the whole point." It is not "paths," as if each Discipline is a separate path which we can take without going down the others. It is "path," the Disciplines are a single reality. They

are a seamless robe. It is like the fruit of the Spirit—not fruits, but fruit. We cannot have love without having joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These all describe a single reality, a single life. The same is true of the Spiritual Disciplines. Sometimes people will get intrigued, for example, with fasting, thinking this single Discipline will really lead them into God. Or, they will take up simplicity. They will go through all kinds of contortions to simplify their lives, yet forget that this is only one part of a much larger picture. The Disciplines comprise an organic whole. For the life that is pleasing to God is not a series of religious duties. It is only one thing—to hear God's voice and to obey his word. The Disciplines are helpful only as they work together to enhance that life.

VI.

The sixth pitfall is to think that the twelve Disciplines which I have mentioned in this article and in *Celebration of Discipline* somehow exhaust the means of God's grace. This is a danger because it looks so neatly packaged—four inward Disciplines, four outward Disciplines, four corporate Disciplines. But Christ is greater than any attempt to describe his workings with his children. He cannot be confined to any system, no matter how worthy. As far as I know, there is no exhaustive list of the Christian Disciplines.

The Spiritual Disciplines are ways by which we place ourselves before God. Whatever ushers us into the Holy of Holies is proper and right for us to engage in. In my discussions I have tried to concentrate on those Spiritual Disciplines which are universal. They are for all Christians at all times. But there are certainly other specific experiences and ways of coming before God that particular individuals will take up at particular times. We must let Christ be our ever present Teacher to show us how we can learn better to walk with him.

There is a perennial temptation to confine Christ as we describe his workings with his children. We will read the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola or Jeremy Taylor's *Rule and Exercise of Holy Living*, and then we will turn them into another system which confines the work of the Spirit rather than sets us free. This temptation is strong when we enter into a wonderful experience of God's presence through particular circumstances: a certain kind of worship service, perhaps with an alter call or a particular hymn like "Just As I Am," a certain liturgy or setting, or a special posture such as kneeling. We think that somehow does it all, and in order to retain the experience we repeat the circumstances. We take what was a living, vibrant reality and calcify and cement it. We destroy the very experience we seek.

There is a delightful little chorus which goes this way:

In a new and living way
Jesus comes to us today.

The way he comes to us today will probably be different than the way he came to us yesterday; and tomorrow will be different from today. We must always be sensitive to these movements so we do not confine the Holy Spirit. No description of the Spiritual Disciplines exhausts the way God works. He will probably teach us spiritual exercises which nobody has written anywhere.

VII.

The seventh pitfall is the most dangerous. It is the temptation to study the Disciplines without experiencing them. To discuss the Disciplines in the abstract, to argue and debate their nature and validity—this we can do in relative safety. But to step out into experience threatens us at the core of our being. Nevertheless, there is no other way. We cannot learn the Spiritual Disciplines in the Western, abstract way. The knowledge comes through the experience. People will debate with me about meditation, for example, but there is only so far we can go in theoretical discussion. This is a field which is like science. We cannot avoid lab experiments. So I say, "Let's not talk about it. Let's do it. Then out of that experience we will reflect upon what happened." We do not debate whether or not it is possible to hear God; we try it, and then see what happens.

Of course, people will say to me there is a danger of falling off the deep end. And that is a danger, but please remember there is also a danger of falling off the shallow end. When a person falls off the deep end at least there is a chance of swimming. If you fall off the shallow end, you are going to break your neck.

In the famous book of Cervantes, Don Quixote de la Mancha says, "It is one thing to praise discipline, and another to submit to it." May God give us the grace to jump in and get our feet wet in this adventurous life of the Spiritual Disciplines.