

PRACTICES OF LOVE



SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD



KYLE DAVID BENNETT



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*To Andrea—
because **you** saved **my** life once,
and continually.*



You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

—Jesus of Nazareth (Mark 12:31)

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.

—Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 2:3)

The chief thing is to love others like yourself, that's the chief thing, and that's everything; nothing else is wanted—you will find out at once how to arrange it all. And yet it's an old truth which has been told and retold a billion times—but it has not formed part of our lives!

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*





Love seeketh not Itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care;
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.
So sung a little Clod of Clay,
Trodden with the cattle's feet;
But a Pebble of the brook,
Warbled out these metres meet
Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to Its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.

—William Blake,
“The Clod and the Pebble”

When one has once fully entered the realm of Love, the world—
no matter how imperfect—becomes rich and beautiful, it consists solely of opportunities for Love.

—Søren Kierkegaard



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FOREWORD

Imagine a unique tree—one that grows in the soil of church fathers such as John Cassian and Gregory the Great, with roots that trace back to “old vines” in Abraham Kuyper and Søren Kierkegaard, and branches grafted from Dallas Willard and Richard Mouw. The fruit of such a tree is this book: a vision for *how* to “do life in the Spirit.”

If I could, I’d insert *Practices of Love* as volume 1.5 in my Cultural Liturgies trilogy. Giants such as Dallas Willard and Richard Foster showed us the significance of the spiritual disciplines for sanctification: Jesus invites us to follow him by *doing what he does*, not just thinking God’s thoughts after him. In *Desiring the Kingdom* (and *You Are What You Love*), I tried to provide an “ecclesiological assist” to their spiritual disciplines project, arguing for the communal, gathered practices of worship as the hub for those other spiritual disciplines—that sacramental worship is the heart of discipleship. But in *Practices of Love*, Kyle Bennett expands the frame and shows us another part of the picture: all these disciplines are undertaken not just for our own relationship to God but also as a way to love our neighbor.

In other words, the spiritual disciplines are how we learn to obey the greatest commandments (Matt. 22:36–40): this is both how you learn to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind *and* how you learn to love your neighbor as yourself. Bennett calls this “flipping the spiritual disciplines on their side”—approaching them not merely as vertical channels for cultivating our relationship with God but as horizontal conduits that direct us into loving what God loves, including our neighbors and God’s creation. Through the disciplines the Spirit invites us to unlearn the habits that lead us to ignore, dismiss, or just plain walk all over our neighbors in their need and vulnerability. The spiritual disciplines are a workshop for crooked, broken culture makers.

Every facet of our Monday to Saturday lives comes into view here. This book is invasive: it’s going to push its way into your eating and your spending. It’s going to take hold of your smartphone and your calendar. It will insert its argument into your family and your friendships. But that’s because all of them matter to God. The spiritual disciplines—the “practices of love”—are how we learn to live out the Kuyperian conviction that there is not a single square inch of creation that isn’t claimed by Jesus. But Bennett reminds us that the creation-claiming Jesus also gives us the gift of these practices to “occupy” creation in ways that are faithful, life giving, and attentive to our neighbors. This is why Bennett rightly describes his project as “a Christian philosophy of public affairs.” But don’t let that scare you off: Bennett’s lively prose and passionate verve will make you forget every caricature of the tweedy, elbow-patched philosopher. This is feisty Christian thinking with wit and wisdom and both eyes fixed squarely on the nitty-gritty realities of the proverbial “real world.” Above all, this book is a thoughtful invitation to life like the new creatures that we are.

James K. A. Smith

PREFACE

If you picked up this book because you are looking for a new, hip, or updated book on spiritual disciplines, then you might as well throw it in the fire pit because you will find this to be a book fit for burning. But if you are someone who cares deeply about following Jesus to the ends of the earth while caring for and enjoying the manifold affairs of God's creation, then this book is for you. And if, by any chance, you are like me and you are tired of the way that we Christians go about our witness to the world through deliberations and debates about ethical norms and political policies, and you want to figure out exactly what following Jesus looks like on the ground, then this book is most assuredly for you.

This book is about spiritual disciplines, but it's unlike other books on the topic. I do not tell you how to practice spiritual disciplines; I only suggest how frequently we should practice them. I do not provide a theology for practicing them; I only remind us of biblical principles to keep in mind as we do them. I do not try to justify our practice of them; I only make plain their significance. There are plenty of other books out there that can provide a history of their practice, a theology to support and motivate you to practice them,

and a user's guide for practicing them. But what's missing from the literature is how these disciplines relate to everything else we do as Christians. What's missing is how these disciplines offer different ways of doing everything we do as human beings, how we can do them in ways that honor and witness to Christ and work toward the well-being of our neighbor. What is missing is how to understand *life* in the Spirit in accordance with our original calling from the Father as human beings and the commission given to us by the Son as his disciples.

What I offer in this book is simple: a framework. I try to synthesize, thematize, and cast these seemingly random and strange practices in a different light so that we can see how they are related and central to God's story of creation, redemption, and renewal and to our participation in it. In doing so, I hope to show that these seemingly strange and random practices relate to our original calling from the Father as human beings, his commandments to us as his people, Jesus's commandments and commissions to us as his disciples, and the Spirit's convicting us and creating us into our Savior and King's image. The way of Jesus is a holistic and integrated life—it covers all aspects of living. Our spirituality, which I will suggest consists of doing life in the Spirit, doesn't involve bringing something new *into* our life or culling something *out of* it but rather entails submitting to Jesus *in* our everyday life. The Spirit is already working in creation to make all things new, and this includes sanctifying our lives to make us new creations.

What I show in these pages is that every day we do basic human activities in selfish ways that negatively affect the life of our neighbor. We do them with only ourselves in mind. And this way of doing them hurts our neighbor, even if we don't see it. The harm may seem small or minor, but it is significant and tangible. Our neighbor's livelihood is certainly affected. Rather than being separate from our concrete lives and everyday affairs, spiritual disciplines

actually correct the harmful ways we do these mundane activities, and through them God invites us to love our neighbor in the most basic and fundamental things we do. We have to discipline our most basic human impulses to make space for our neighbor and care for her. These practices discipline our selfish, harmful ways so that we can live and be guided by the Spirit in our everyday activities. It is through doing this that we can truly love our neighbor and bring life to her world.

The way of Jesus does not involve endless private, mystical experiences that tickle our fancy. Rather, it is the transformation of mundane activities that have vast public implications for our neighbor. Many of us are blind to the ways that we oppress, neglect, and ignore our neighbor in the little things that we do every day. We have “blind spots” in our practice of love. We have coherent, solid, and persuasive views on sexuality, abortion, immigration, and taxation, for example, but we’re not entirely aware of or intentional about what we do during the week. At the end of the day (or more precisely, during the day), when we are done with our deliberations and debates and we put away abstract concepts and universal principles, what happens? What are we like? What do we do in our daily deeds? Are we loving our neighbor in our everyday procedures and cultural practices? In theory we claim to love our neighbor, but do we love her “on the ground”? What does this entail for us as stay-at-home parents, patrons, consumers, or voters?

Though in articulation this is a trade book, in substance it is a Christian philosophy of public affairs—a program for following the wise example of Christ in our interpersonal world. This is discipleship with a spine and a face. This is following Jesus in the flesh. What would it look like to image Christ? What does it mean to image God or cocreate with him, be a disciple of Jesus Christ and represent him, or be renewed and made holy in the Spirit? What I offer here includes some phenomenological analysis, theological

commentary, historical appropriation, and pastoral admonition in the lines and between them. I'll let the philosophers, professors, pastors, and pundits study or smash them. Ultimately, I hope that this is a book for you—the homemaker, the barista, and the actuary. I am most interested in what this book *does* for you at home, in the pew, and in the marketplace. I hope it resonates with you. I hope you find hope in the struggle. I hope it bears the fruit of a few new ideas, instills new passions, or instructs appropriate reactions in the future.

Practices of Love is a play on Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*—a book that pierces me with conviction every time I put my grubby hands on it. If you want to explore what it truly means to follow Christ, look no further than Kierkegaard. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard helps us see that love for our neighbor will take many forms and demands many things of us. He shows us how love for our neighbor works. But we are left to discern how we can and should love our neighbor in the itty-bitty, little things that we do. We see the demand, but we are left wondering how the demand concretely plays out in our lives. I hope *Practices of Love* fulfills such a need, even if it's only a start. I hope it helps us see the trees of loving our neighbor, not only the forest. Together through Christ may we truly love our neighbor as ourselves, whole selves, and may we find ourselves in Christ as we love our neighbor.

INTRODUCTION

SPIRITUAL HEROIN

HOW NOT TO GET FIXED

“Don’t do it,” I said. “Don’t do the forty-day fast—that’s my suggestion.”

My friend had hit a “spiritual rut,” as he put it, sagging his lower lip. He told me that he had “a buddy who just finished a forty-day fast,” and “man, it sounds like I need something like that!” He then asked me if I had any suggestions. It was the quickest shift from somberness to cheer I’d ever seen. He was struggling with the rut but stirred by the possibility of overcoming it. He knew the problem and the solution, and I watched as the wheels turned in his head. His sagging lip started to resurrect as he thought about the potential experience.

He knew that I had practiced fasting, and he was looking for guidance. At first I thought that by “suggestions” he was looking for edifying devotional literature to read during the fast. You know, something to “pump him up” and get him through this difficult time. I would have been ready to fire off a few suggestions at the drop of a hat—anything by Augustine, Bonaventure, Thomas Boston, Samuel

Rutherford, Søren Kierkegaard, or Eugene Peterson. But it became quite clear to me early in our conversation that he had nothing of the sort in mind. He was far more interested in acquiring some tips and tricks for getting through the forty days of fasting than he was in being edified or challenged in his pursuit.

I waited for a moment while he finished ordering his food. (Today was his “Fat Tuesday”—the gorge before the purge—and he chose the burger chain Five Guys as his Last Supper.) Reluctance sat in his eyes while excitement leapt from every one of his words. I held my tongue for a short while. And then a little longer. He continued to share what he was going through and what he hoped to get from his fast. I tried my hardest to keep quiet—I had been there before. I knew the excitement. I understood the motivation. But I had to tell him that I had experienced the failure. I had to tell him what I went through. I was foaming at the lips with caution. Yet I couldn’t stand back and do nothing. I had to be honest with him. Eventually I caved.

“Don’t do it,” I said. “Don’t do the forty-day fast—that’s my suggestion.” He paused and looked up at me. “Wait . . . what?” A flimsy tomato slithered from his sesame seed bun onto his napkin. With earnestness he looked for a smile indicating jest—surely, surely I must be kidding. (He and I did like to kid a lot, but now was not one of those times.) With every inkling of energy I could muster, I refrained from any smile or slight twinkle of the eye. I didn’t want to give the wrong impression. “Be stone cold and sincere, Kyle,” I kept telling myself. All my energy was concentrated in my face, focused on maintaining this stoic look. “Don’t do it,” I said again.

The more I said it, the more I felt confident in saying it. The more I said it to him, the more I believed it myself. I was convincing myself. “Don’t do the forty-day fast.” I spent the next hour of this Last Supper trying to persuade him that he shouldn’t go through with the fast. “We should talk about this further,” I said. He, however,

continued cramming two beef patties down his throat in preparation for tomorrow. I tried. I really did.

Getting a Feel for Contemporary Christian Spirituality

This interaction with my friend is illustrative of a trend I have seen in contemporary Christian spirituality, especially in the lived practice of Protestant evangelicals: we tend to link our personal relationship with God to stimulation and the need to feel what some psychologists have called “positive” emotions.¹ In essence this means that when we don’t feel good, we turn to God to make us better. Our hope is that God will replace the “negative” emotions (e.g., sadness, anger, fear) that we are feeling with “positive” ones (e.g., excitement, serenity, confidence). This is clearly evident in our corporate worship times with God. Whether it’s Pentecostal altar calls, Baptist praise and worship concerts, or Presbyterian mission trips, we long to be stimulated by God. We want and expect to feel something when we reach out to him. When we go to youth rallies, we want to be “set on fire.” When we walk forward during altar calls, we want to be enraptured. We long to be moved. We seek to be excited. We yearn for the arousal. We desire to be inspired. The marrow of our bones throbs for this. Our heart pulses for it. This is why many of our Protestant churches have modeled their worship services on concerts—stimulation is the name of the game.

What we really want in these times of worship is to be moved from a “negative” emotional state to a “positive” one, from sadness or worry to excitement or confidence. We want to move from “blah” to “yippee.” We want to feel good and have a “positive” emotional experience. This is what we’re looking for and anticipating. This is what we’re expecting. And the proof is in how we behave in anticipation of this happening. The proof is in how we walk away from these church events and worship experiences: when we don’t walk

out with a “positive” emotion or experience, we’re disappointed. We had a “meh” experience at church that day, and later on dark thoughts start to infiltrate our heads. We wonder: “Where was God today? Why didn’t he meet me? Is he staying away from me right now? I don’t feel him. Maybe I’m having a ‘dark night of the soul.’”² Thoughts may get out of hand, and we start to worry: “Maybe I did something wrong. Maybe God’s mad at me. Maybe this is my punishment.” Perhaps this is you. Have you ever had such thoughts or worries? Have you ever felt this way? Maybe you know someone who has?

There’s nothing wrong with stimulation, of course. God made us as beings who can stimulate and be stimulated. He created us to experience and sense things, as beings who can stimulate other creatures and be stimulated ourselves. And we can be stimulated in pleasurable ways. Stimulation is not a bad thing; in fact, it’s a really, really good thing. Likewise, it’s not wrong for us to enjoy “positive” emotions. There’s nothing wrong with feeling good or trying to be “positive.”³ Most of us would probably think someone is a nutcase or wacko if he didn’t enjoy these fine qualities of our nature and the experiences we have of them. Why would anyone not want to feel good (if that’s even possible)? But what seems to happen in our lived practice of worship is that we don’t simply *enjoy* the stimulation; we *expect* it from God.⁴ We don’t just *value* “positive” emotions, but in our lived experience and practice, we *demand* them from God every time we step foot in a church or “meet” with him. God gets demoted, and what we can get from God is promoted.

These expectations and demands have dangerous effects on our *idea* of the gospel and our *ideal* experience of God. We end up expecting the gospel to stir us, arouse us, excite us, and inspire us every time we read or hear it. We expect the good news to make us feel good and to cultivate “positive” emotions in us, not “negative” ones.

It becomes inconceivable to us that the gospel of Jesus Christ could sadden, anger, or offend us—if it does, then it’s probably a demon afflicting us. Surely the good news of Jesus Christ can’t sadden or anger or offend us! Or so we think. Nor do we expect to walk away from drawing near to God in worship feeling angry, sad, offended, or worried.⁵ We don’t anticipate coming home from a mission trip feeling empty or lost. We don’t want to walk away from a Bible study feeling disappointed. We hope that we don’t finish a fast or a period of silence feeling frustrated. In fact, if we’re honest with ourselves, we would admit that if we knew we would experience such disappointment, frustration, or loss after doing these things, we probably wouldn’t do them!

Now we probably won’t come across any discussion of this tendency in the tomes or annals of Christian theology. We won’t hear church historians debate controversies surrounding it. We might read it in a sociology book on American religion, or we might come across a pastor or two drawing attention to it in a congregation, but it’s not going to be a topic of discussion in our small group. There won’t be a series preached on it. But if we pay close attention to our expectations and experiences, this search for stimulation and “positive” emotions is at the heart of our lived practice of spirituality. This is what we expect, anticipate, and even demand from God. And if you’re anything like me, this is what founded and fueled your passion and practice of spiritual disciplines. It’s probably how you still practice these disciplines. Truth be told, I think it’s a real problem.

Spiritual Heroin

I come from a family that didn’t make a ton of money—my dad was a carpet installer, my mom a day-care assistant. I didn’t work in high school or college, so this made my college experience a bit . . .

ah . . . how shall we put it? Tempestuous. I didn't get any academic scholarships, but I did have a very small athletic stipend that my basketball coach generously awarded me after I made the team as a walk-on. Most of my college tuition came from loans, with a few occasional balances coming out of my parents' pockets and this basketball stipend. But this all changed the second semester of my sophomore year when I injured my wrist. I became inactive and lost the stipend. I had a snafu with my loans, and I couldn't pay my school bill. So I couldn't continue matriculating. I had to move back in with my parents and look for a job.

It was a really difficult time for me. I was laying brick in dead-of-winter January and bored out of my mind. I got the job through a friend of a friend but had never laid brick before. The learning curve was very high. While it was a blessing to find a job so quickly, and one that paid decently, I'll be honest: I was out of my element. I was confused by what I was doing. I felt dejected. I worried about my future. I was eager to know what my roommates and my girlfriend were doing. They were back at school getting on without me. Were they thinking of me? Were they poking fun at me? Would my girlfriend find someone else? How often would we get to see each other? Was I now behind in my studies? Would my friends and girlfriend graduate before me? Would I even be able to go back to school? Where would I get that much money? How long would I have to save?

These thoughts and questions made me feel uneasy, uncomfortable, anxious, and insecure. So I did what I had been taught to do in this kind of situation: I turned to God. But I didn't turn to him only in prayer; I turned to him in every possible way with the Christian's full arsenal at my side. For it was this sophomore semester of mandated academic furlough that led me to first dabble in spiritual disciplines. Well, "dabble" might be a bit of an understatement. What really happened is that I ensconced myself in my bedroom

and fasted for whole weekends. Every morning I read and studied the Bible to inspire and encourage me. I meditated on the woes of Job and whispered them in my prayers. I fasted and imagined Sarai's feelings in her times of trouble. I wondered if I could have Nehemiah's courage in my situation. Occasionally I emerged from my self-inflicted cave to use the lavatory.

After several weeks, not much happened. I didn't hear anything. I didn't *feel any better*. These disciplines didn't seem to be working. The dullness and emptiness began to take their toll. The fasting and "solituding" for days became laborious and boring. The extended periods of repetition—ugh. "Is this really worth it?" "When are they going to kick in and start working?" "God, where are you?!" "Maybe I'm doing all this incorrectly." These were my thoughts. Eventually I became disillusioned. I continued to pray, but the eagerness to practice solitude and fasting had died a quick death. I eventually stopped doing these practices. Apparently their "success rate" that year was at an all-time low. Or maybe they just didn't work after all. Or maybe I wasn't doing them correctly. That must be it. Whatever the reason, their impotence coupled with the fact that they were inconvenient to do led me to just give up on them. I was confident that God could still be experienced in less laborious and invasive ways, even if I had to wait.

This experience in my sophomore year and my friend's story mentioned above have a common thread. In our lived practice of spiritual disciplines—specifically our motivation and attitude—my friend and I treated these disciplines like a drug that would afford us an emotional "fix." We treated them like divine opiates that would help us reach spiritual euphoria. They were like heroin to us. We did them to be stimulated. We did them to get high. We wanted to feel good. Both of us needed some kind of "rush." He fasted to get himself out of his spiritual rut, and I fasted, meditated, and "solituded" to get out of those slums of doubt and despair in that sophomoric

semester. He needed stimulation and excitement, and I needed to feel securely close to God. Both of us needed some resolution to a spiritual “crisis” or an adverse circumstance in our life. We hoped to be stimulated, aroused, moved, changed, uplifted, and, hopefully, “set on fire” by picking up these ancient disciplines.

Perhaps you, too, have practiced them this way or still do. You are not alone. Many of us nowadays treat spiritual disciplines like heroin. We turn to them in times of trouble—when we are emotionally low or in a rut—and we use them to get a “spiritual high.” We use them to get emotional shots of Jesus juice, if you will. We practice them because we want to feel stimulated, excited, or inspired afterward. When they don’t “work” or give us the result we’re looking for, we adapt. We go from soft practices to hard ones: from studying the Bible every morning to fasting for an entire day. Or we go from “solituding” for the weekend to scheduling a silent retreat for a week. When we don’t get the high or spiritual euphoria that we seek or expect, or when the issue, situation, or emotional state that prompted us to practice a given discipline doesn’t get resolved, we increase the dosage, so to speak. Instead of fasting for one day, we up the dosage to three days. Then forty days. We go from practicing solitude for a few hours on a Saturday afternoon to camping out in our closet for the weekend.

Then, when the issue, situation, or emotional state has been resolved, we stop doing the discipline and return to our daily life, our day-to-day routines. We go back to what we were doing before. This is also true of our corporate practice of these disciplines. Whenever we practice fasting or silence in church, it is most often done for a time and a season. We fast because it’s Lent. Once Lent passes, we stop fasting. Or we have a time of silence because we are in deep distress over a social issue that is currently before Congress. Once the social issue has been decided or the media hype wears down, we move on. We go back to our regularly scheduled lives. We don’t

fast, meditate, serve, or practice silence and solitude all year. Why would we? We only need to do these practices when something is wrong—particularly when we don't feel close to God or we don't feel that God is close to us. And if asked whether we *view* these disciplines as drugs that give us this “fix,” we would unequivocally *say* no. Nevertheless, this is how we *treat* them. This is how we *use* them.

When we step back and look at the big picture, we can identify three tendencies in our lived practice of these disciplines that are founded in and fueled by our search for stimulation and “positive” emotions. Let's call them the “Three I's” of North American Christian practice of spiritual disciplines: individualism, intellectualism, and instrumentalism. We tend to practice spiritual disciplines as individuals and for ourselves as individuals. We practice them in isolation or somewhere we can't be seen. If we do end up doing them in a corporate setting, for example, in a congregational worship service or a youth lock-in, we treat them as individual alone time with God—we may be with others, but this is between us and God. The individual benefit that we tend to pursue through these disciplines is an intellectual good. By this I mean we are most interested in acquiring a wider understanding of Jesus's ways, a greater knowledge of his power and work, or a stronger faith in him. And we use these disciplines as instruments to help us get this. Then, when we have what we need or complete what we set out to do, we're done with them. They are only temporary practices for us.

Flipping Spiritual Disciplines on Their Side

Years ago, when I was reflecting on these past experiences with spiritual disciplines and how I was practicing them, and to a large extent how we tend to practice them in North American democratic

society, I came across a passage in the book of Isaiah. It really made me think about how I practiced spiritual disciplines and to what end.

Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
 and bring the homeless poor into your house;
 when you see the naked, to cover them,
 and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
 and your healing shall spring up quickly;
 your vindicator shall go before you,
 the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
 you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
 the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
 if you offer your food to the hungry
 and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
 then your light shall rise in the darkness
 and your gloom be like the noonday.
 The LORD will guide you continually,
 and satisfy your needs in parched places,
 and make your bones strong;
 and you shall be like a watered garden,
 like a spring of water,
 whose waters never fail.
 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
 you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
 you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
 the restorer of streets to live in.

(Isa. 58:1–12)

What’s going on here? Well, essentially God is telling the Israelites that they’ve been selfish in their practice of what we nowadays call “spiritual disciplines.” Now in a sense, they have been doing everything that they’re supposed to be doing. They have been doing these practices; they have been disciplining their lives. But in another

sense, they have done nothing right and everything wrong. It was this passage that got me wondering: What are spiritual disciplines, and why should we do them? Why do we do them? Why does God want us to do them? Are individual benefit and intellectual goods all there is to be gained from them? Can these things actually be gained from them? Can and should we practice them to feel better? Are they meant to bring us closer to God? Are they only about experiencing God and being intimate with him? Can they actually bring us closer to God?

Many of us have been taught that spiritual disciplines are means for fostering “spiritual growth” and helping us grow in our knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ.⁶ We have been taught to see these practices as ways of experiencing our risen Lord and knowing him on a deeper level. We have practiced them to understand, know, and experience him. And maybe some good things have come from this. But like the ancient Israelites, maybe quite a few of us were oblivious to the fact that along the way, we oppressed a neighbor or two, or a hundred. We sought God and delighted in his ways yet served our own interests. We fasted and drew near to God but oppressed those around, beside, and below us. We humbled ourselves but bickered and fought with strangers. We abstained from food, but we didn’t share it with the poor or those in need. We resisted consumerism but walked past the homeless man with holes in his coat. We sought God but forsook our neighbor. We pursued God but persecuted others. Our worship became a vehicle for wickedness. Our spiritual formation become a catalyst for selfish practice.

Like the ancient Israelites before us, many of us have lost our way with these disciplines. In fact, we could even say that many of us have lost ourselves in these disciplines. We’ve gotten a bit off track with how, why, and when we practice them. We’ve been searching for “fixes” that these disciplines will never be able to provide. We’ve come up short. We’ve been searching for experiences that

God won't provide on demand. This has been disappointing and maddening. The real danger, though, is not that we have practiced them in this way, which sets us up for failure and maybe even a crisis of faith because we never get the results we want. No, the real danger, as we see from this passage in Isaiah, is what we have done to our neighbor in the process. Or a better way of putting it: the real danger is what we have neglected to do for our neighbor in the process. While we have been trying to love God, we have been harming our neighbor.

This “vertical” dimension to spiritual disciplines may be news to you—and I hope *good* news—but it is only one side of the equation. This emphasis on spiritual growth and intimacy with God is only one part of the whole. And at least to God, it seems that it's not even the most important side of the equation or the most important part of the whole. When we take a close look at the Bible and church history (and even our own experience), we see that there's another side to these disciplines that we've overlooked. There's another angle that we've never noticed in our practice of them. There's another dimension to their practice that we've never heard preached from the pulpit. There's another profile that we've neglected to see in our small group study of these disciplines and in the books that we've read or speakers that we've heard. Something important has been sidelined. And it's a very important thing to God.

Somewhere along the way the “horizontal” dimension to these practices has been overlooked, ignored, and forgotten. All along, a focus on the neighbor and the benefit that these disciplines have for one's neighbor have been sidelined. And the time is ripe for it to be retrieved, explored, and developed. As you will come to see through the pages of this book, for Christians before us, these disciplines were not primarily or exclusively practiced for the intellectual goods that they offer each of us as individuals. They were not really practiced for us at all. Rather, they were practiced for others. They

were practiced to help and benefit others. They were seen as acts of love toward one's neighbor that bring life and health and vitality to the world. They were seen as practices that discipline us to positively impact our neighbor's livelihood and concretely change the conduct of the communities of which we are a part. They were seen as good things to do in shared spaces with others.

When we step back and consider spiritual disciplines in this way—that is, when we look at them from the side and pay attention to this horizontal dimension—we see more than a bunch of seemingly random and strange practices that help us get closer to God. What we see is actually a synchronized and systematic way of living that reforms basic, everyday activities. We see ways of liberating and healing our everyday activities of owning, thinking, eating, socializing, talking, working, and resting. We see a coherent and integrated way of life that we were designed to live and the way that God calls and commands us to live. We see everyday activities done in ways that are healthy and honor God. But most importantly, we see everyday activities done in ways that help our neighbor and heal our relationship with others (i.e., family, friends, strangers, and enemies), including other animals and the earth, and harmonize our world. In short, we see the way of Jesus.

The Christian life is not a life dripping with personal satisfaction or one of basking in feeling “positive.” It isn't a life baptized in stimulation or excitement. It definitely isn't a life of consecutive “highs” and “fixes.” Rather, it is a reformed and transformed lifestyle lived according to the Father's design, the Son's example, and the Spirit's guidance. It is a life of reconciliation, restoration, and renewal. It is a life of loving our neighbor as ourselves. It is a life of doing everyday activities such as owning, thinking, eating, socializing, talking, working, and resting in ways that demonstrate love of others and bring life to the world. And as we will come to see, this is precisely the life we live by, in, and through spiritual disciplines.

These seemingly random and strange practices are actually sanctified and renewed ways of doing everyday activities.

Maybe you are like I was and you've dropped out of the school of spiritual disciplines long ago and you're doing just fine. You see the relevance and value that these disciplines have for pastors, educators, or spiritual directors—people who take their relationship with God really, really seriously and have the time for such activities—but you, an “ordinary,” run-of-the-mill Christian sitting in the pew, don't have the time or energy for them. You don't really need them. Praying and reading your Bible in the morning is good enough for you. Because let's be honest: these disciplines are way too inconvenient to fit into our schedules and practice, they've “failed” us many times, and to be quite frank, we don't really see the need or the urgency to practice them. We're not “commanded” to do them, they aren't changing the world, and we're still going to get to heaven. If this is you, I was there, my friend. I completely understand.

If the person I've described is you, then this book will help you see a larger project afoot that might give you more incentive to give spiritual disciplines another shot. In your busy life as a hairstylist, entrepreneur, actuary, or homemaker, I especially hope you give them another shot. Or if you've never practiced them before, I hope you give them a try for the first time. For as you will come to hear and see, spiritual disciplines are for disciples of Jesus Christ living in the world—not just the really devoted ones who want to escape it. They are for all disciples who want to follow their Teacher to the ends of the earth. They are for you and they are for me—human beings living hectic lives, not aspiring angels seeking heaven through death. They are for those of us who want to follow our Lord and Savior here and now and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

In general, many of us tend to overlook or maybe even downplay how our personal spiritual formation impacts those around us. We know that God calls and commands us to love our neighbor, and

on a fundamental level, we know that our relationship with God involves others. But maybe what we don't know or realize is that others are implicated in how we interact and relate to God. Our relationship to God is through and through a public matter. It is a worldly affair. Our relationship with God influences and impacts life and livelihoods all around us—whether or not we want it to. And I hope we want it to. The Christian life is about bringing all things under Christ and allowing the Spirit to convict us and guide us in everyday, mundane activities. The Spirit does this through spiritual disciplines that influence and impact those around us. A change in our owning, thinking, eating, socializing, talking, working, and resting habits and practices influences our neighbor's life and livelihood. She experiences and is enlightened to alternative ways of doing these things. This instructs and benefits her.

God hangs out in the trivial. Transformation waits dormant in the mundane. Our Savior's redeeming hand leaves no stone unturned, and his renewing gaze leaves no square inch unseen. His call to us as his disciples to follow him and live in him means worshiping him in *all* that we do. When looked at from the side, spiritual disciplines are not just different ways of doing everyday activities but sanctified and renewed ways of doing them. They are ways of living in God. Our sanctification and the renewal of all things doesn't drop from the sky but comes through the Father, the Son, and the Spirit remedying and renewing the daily, mundane activities and the relationships, practices, and institutions that are built on them.