



The Spirit of the Disciplines

Dallas Willard

*“The soul and the body make a man;
the spirit and discipline make a Christian.”*

– John Wesley

*“The spiritual life is a life of intersection with a personal God,
and it is pure delusion to suppose that it can be carried on sloppily
[i.e., in lieu of the necessary spiritual disciplines].”*

– Dallas Willard

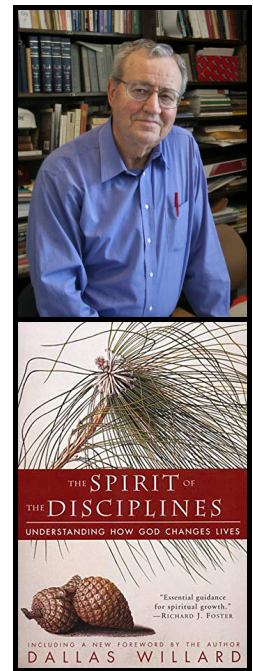
Introduction

Dallas Willard (1935-2013).

- Professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California.
- A mentor in the field of Christian spiritual formation.
- A best-selling author.
- Willard’s core message: Christian discipleship comes through God’s grace and guidance, but also our determination and cooperation.
 - ▶ I Tim. 4:7 – “Train yourself to be godly.”
 - ▶ Serious followers of Christ pursue those disciplines and habits that lead to spiritual transformation.

The Book.

- Amazon description:
 - ▶ This wise and compelling meditation invites us to a new understanding that sees salvation not only in terms of forgiveness of sins but in light of the total transformation of our lives. Dallas Willard presents a way of living that enables ordinary men and women to join with God and realize their highest aspirations of well-being and -doing. The key to this self-transformation resides in the practice of the spiritual disciplines....



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“We can increasingly resemble Christ in character and in power by following him in his overall style of life,” Willard affirms. “This was the method of his earliest disciples, and it is as valid today as it was then.”

The Theme.

- How to live as Jesus lived in harmony with the life and will of God the Father.
 - Dallas Willard: “There is a way of spiritual transformation that is accessible to all people and the it really does work in the contemporary world.... [Simply following the example of Jesus] leads us through our lives into eternity.... We receive a power far beyond ourselves.” [vi]
- Our society and culture are changing drastically, and modern life is increasingly complex, confusing and stressful.
 - We live in a society in which many people suffer from isolation, loneliness, personal emptiness and depression – all of which contributes to a pathology of escapism either through mindless (and soul-less) junk entertainment, compulsive consumerism, drug and alcohol addiction, or other destructive tendencies.
- Contemporary church life usually does little to foster Christian spiritual maturity.
- The solution:
 - DW: “Christianity can only succeed as a guide for current humanity if it does two things: First, it must take the need for human transformation as seriously as do modern revolutionary movements.... Second, it needs to clarify and exemplify realistic methods of human transformation....
 “My central claim is that we *can* become like Christ by doing one thing – by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live. We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in... [so as] to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father.” [viii-ix]

Willard’s Personal Testimony.

- In the early 1970s Willard began systematically teaching the traditional Christian spiritual disciplines in his church.
 - DW: “Seventeen years of ministerial efforts in a wide range of denominational settings had made it clear to me that what Christians were normally told to do, the standard advice to churchgoers, was not advancing them spiritually.”
 - Christian “discipleship” – if it was emphasized at all – consisted of regular church attendance, supporting the ministry of the church through their time and money, reading the Bible, doing good to others, and witnessing for their faith.
 - DW: “In the early 1970s, I began to teach the disciplines.... Over time, many of those whom he taught began to see the benefits of practicing the traditional methods of spiritual formation in terms of their own spiritual growth.
- “Our world has embarked on a suicidal journey.” [1]

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- The place of sex in marriage:
 - DW: “Sexuality cannot be allowed to permeate our lives” – and even within the context of marriage, “it is absolutely vital to the health of any marriage that sexual gratification not be placed at the center.” [171, 170]

Secrecy (Humility or Meekness).

- Seek humility (or meekness) rather than glory, fame and attention.
 - Avoid self-promotion.
- God judges us not only on what we think, say and do, but on our motives.
 - Our goal should be to do nothing “out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than ourselves” – Phil.2:3.
- Our calling is to be a source of Light, Love, Hope and Truth – but it is God’s prerogative whether or not our good words and deeds are noticed by many or few.
- Our true character is revealed in what we do in private. (!)
- True humility is a realistic acknowledgement of who and what we are – our talents, gifts and knowledge – but also our weaknesses and ignorance.

Sacrifice.

- Total abandonment to God: “Stepping into the dark abyss in the faith and hope that God will provide for us and sustain us.” [175]
- Biblical examples:
 - Abraham – Gen. 22:1-19; Heb. 11:19.
 - The poor widow – Luke 21:20-4.

Disciplines of Engagement

Study.

- In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard focuses primarily on reading Scripture as a meditative practice (*lectio divina*).

[NOTE: Richard Foster develops the discipline of study in greater depth in *Celebration of Discipline*.]

Worship.

- Worship is the practice of filling our hearts and minds with the wonder and majesty of our Creator and Redeemer.
 - DW: “In worship we engage ourselves with, dwell upon, and express the greatness, beauty, and goodness of God through thought and the use of words, rituals and symbols.” [177]
- Worship should be a perpetual condition of our heart:
 - Rev. 4:11 – “ You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power; for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” (Also Rev. 5:12-13.)

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Afterwords

Epilogue.

- The purpose of this book is to show how to live as Jesus lived in harmony with God the Father through the internal guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- The “Spirit of the Disciplines” is nothing less than the desire to deepen our love of God through the internal guidance of the Holy Spirit in keeping with the example and lifestyle that Jesus modeled.
- Our challenge:
 - ▶ DW: “It is time to take what you have learned and make your own specific plan for your life. This will come down to what you do [not only on Sunday but every day of the week].... You will be challenged to consider how thoroughly you are committed to following Jesus, and you find that your commitment is remarkably flabby and thin because it has never been translated into how you spend your time [and what your true priorities are in life].” [252]

Appendix II: Discipleship – for Super-Christians Only?

- The state of the modern church: the problem of “undisciplined disciples”.
 - ▶ DW: “For [many] decades the church of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian.... Contemporary American churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example, spirit, and teachings as a condition for membership.... So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship is optional.” [258-59]
- The message of the Great Commission is to make disciples.
- It’s all about priorities.
 - ▶ DW: “The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christlike,... systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs [and priorities] to that end.” [261]
 - ▶ By contrast, the nondisciple... has a different agenda: self-fulfillment, social status, wealth, power, pleasure, “fun” and entertainment. [262]
- “Cheap grace” and “the cost of discipleship”.
 - ▶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937): the problem of “cheap grace”.
- **Pop evangelicalism and the problem of “relevancy”.**
 - ▶ When wholistic discipleship is ignored, Christians forfeit the integrity of the faith.
 - ▶ The church today has relatively little influence on how its members prioritize their time, energy, and resources.
 - ▶ Furthermore, the church today has little influence in our culture.
- The solution: Romans 12:1-2.

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