

Spiritual Formation Disciplines – Session Seven – Submission & Sabbath

A. Introduction

We want to continue our thinking about spiritual disciplines by thinking first about submission and then about the Sabbath. The discipline of submission is crucial in helping us grow in godliness. Without it we will fail to follow God's leading and will remain essentially the person we were when we first made the decision to follow Jesus. The Bible encourages us to work our salvation in fear and trembling and part of that work is learning how as a follower of Jesus to embrace submission.

B. Allow me to define submission. Simply put, submission is the alignment of my will with God's will. The desire expressed in this discipline is that Jesus would be in charge of my life in every way.

When we desire to submit our lives to Jesus then we will want to know what Jesus thinks about the decisions that are before us. Big questions like where should I live, what should I do with my life, who should I marry, and how to respond to the neighbour who is growing marijuana in his garage. But countless other questions as well. What about my friend who betrayed me? What about the love for my spouse that seems to be growing cold? What about the money I want to spend on holidays, home renovations, and a new led flat screen TV? What does Jesus think about these things and what is His will for me in them?

Now you may be thinking, "Are you sure that submission is a Christian discipline? I like making my own decisions about these things and many more." What you have just shared is called independence. We are fond of it and it is the essence of sin. Sin simply is living independently of God and having my own way. Submission to God, His Word, and other godly leaders allows us to live in an interdependent manner with God and others. It is this interdependence with God and other believers that God uses to catalyze our growth toward Christ-likeness.

C. The Practice of Submission in the Scriptures

1. The discipline of submission begins with Jesus. In Luke 9:23 Jesus tells His disciples this: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." This statement reveals the truth that if we are to be disciples of Jesus, then we must put our desire to be independent to death. Putting your will to death allows you to align yourself with Jesus.

This idea is all the more evident when you consider the meaning of the phrases "deny himself," "take up his cross," and "follow me." They all convey the same meaning: death. Not a physical death of course but a death to the independence that comes when you chart out your own destiny.

If you deny yourself you make yourself dead to your desires.

If you carry your cross . . . well in Jesus' day, only persons condemned to die carried crosses. And at this point in their lives it does not matter what hopes, desires, and plans they had because only one thing is before them: death. They are incapable of being independent, of fulfilling their own desires. That option has been taken away.

And the phrase "follow me" also means death. If you follow another you have no say in the direction or the destination. You are at the mercy of the leader.

This is how it must be if we are to follow Jesus. We make the decision to follow Him. We go where He leads us, we do what He says. It is as if I am dead to my will in all matters where Jesus makes His will known.

This is what Paul means when he says to the believers in Galatia (2:20) that "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son

of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” The life I live as a follower of Jesus is energized and directed by His will.

2. In Luke 5:1 – 11 we see this principle at work in the life of Simon Peter. Peter is a fisherman. I think it is fair to assume that he was a good one. Fishing was the family business. It was not a hobby it was how his family made a living. So Peter the fisherman has fished all night and Jesus the teacher tells Peter to put out in deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Peter hesitates. You would have too. To submit to Jesus in fishing means he must defer to Jesus’ knowledge and understanding in his area of expertise because he knows already from his own recent experience that there are no fish to be caught. To submit to Jesus in this instance means he could possibly look very foolish. To submit to Jesus here at this moment could mean a whole lot of work for nothing. But note how Peter responds to Jesus. “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

Peter submits only because Jesus has asked it. Had another fisherman asked Peter to do the same thing Peter would have, I am certain, said, “No. I am tired, I have worked hard all night. The nets are cleaned and ready for the next time. I am going home to sleep.

But to Jesus Peter submits and this submission allows him to experience the power and grace of Jesus.

This is an important lesson for believers; it is only when a believer aligns his will with the will of Jesus that he experiences God acting in his life in significant ways. This event changed Peter. Had he not aligned his will with Jesus, had he not submitted to the word of Jesus, he would have failed to experience what God was ready to show him. He might have remained a mere fisher of fish instead of becoming as fisher of men.

4. But submission is not just practiced in our relationship with God and His Word. We are to be submissive to our fellow believers and our spiritual leaders as well. In Hebrews 13:17 the Bible tells us to “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.” And in Ephesians 5:21 it also tells us to “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Even to government the follower of Jesus is to submit. This means you are not to cheat on your taxes or circumvent the law. 1 Peter 2:13 says, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority.”

God uses those who have walked with Him a while to help those who are new at it. The truth is that God uses submission to teach the believer things he might never learn had he not encounter such a situation. Sometimes the lessons learned in submission are about God and other times one will learn about his or her self, but for the one submitting with God submission is never without some profit.

And this brings us to where submission gets difficult because we each have choices. And the choice to submit is not always easy and often it does not seem right, fair, or logical to do so.

So what challenges will the believer face who seeks to practice the discipline of submission?

D. Challenges to the Practice of Submission

1. The first challenge one might encounter is the idea that in our day every person is an “expert” and has the wherewithal to decide what is best. Now this is often true and that is what makes this idea so insidious. We believe that what is true in some circumstances is true for all circumstances.

So for example, I know what is best for me in terms of diet. I would say that I am a bit of an expert in the dietary needs of Hamish Buntain. I know that when I eat cashews I will suffer physically so I choose not to eat them. I know that when I eat brussels sprouts I will suffer emotionally so I do not

eat them. I know that it is not in my best interests to eat French fries every day. Now I do not know that personally, I learned that on the Internet. The Internet made me an expert in spite of the fact that I know nothing much about French fries other than I think they are tasty with ketchup. Actually the Internet has made experts of many in all kinds of subjects. So it is not a big jump for me to believe that I am an expert in most if not all things pertaining to me. So I become the final authority about my life. I defer to no one because no one is so committed to my life as me. No one knows me like me. I am the best judge of what is good for me and what makes me happy. I am the authority on me and I am the expert on all things related to me.

But is that true? Actually, God is more committed to me than I am as He died for me and even I have not done that for me. Moreover, knowing what is best for me does not guarantee that I will do that. I have eaten French fries days in a row and I have eaten cashews (I really like them) in spite of the suffering I knew that was sure to come. And others know me better than I know myself. My wife Cindy is one. God is another.

But here is what happens: My expertise about food and other things I have learned from the Internet will often leak over in to my spiritual life. Now I have been set up. Because when I see something in the Bible about how I ought to forgive others I defer to my own judgment instead of God's. When a friend is courageous enough to speak to me about a careless word or deed, I judge him as being overly harsh, ignorant of the circumstances, and quickly dismiss his thoughts. My expertise in life makes it difficult for me submit to God's Word or the counsel of a friend.

So the challenge of submission is that because I believe I am so smart about all things related to me I instinctually and quickly dismiss any thoughts of submission to another, even God. The very knowledge that is to make me wise conspires to make me rebellious and stubborn so that submission to God, His Word, or another is rarely given serious thought.

2. A second belief also works against me. It is the commonly held belief that **submission will not make me happy**. Our culture has taught us that life is for the pursuit of happiness. We do the things that make us happy and reject the things that will not. Burger King encourages us in this vein with its jingle "have it your way." Why? Because your way will make you happy.

I have a friend who shared with me that his 9 year old daughter said to him the other day, "Daddy, I am not happy and I am supposed to be happy." Wow. At 9 years of age she has already learned that it is her right to be happy. What will she do when she is told to turn off the TV, clean up her room, and get ready for bed and it conflicts with her happiness? She will have a problem.

And when Jesus says that we must deny self, sell our possessions and give to the poor, forgive those who have hurt us, and other such things, we resist Him because we are not sure that those actions will bring us the most happiness. This belief, that the world is here for my happiness, leads us to suspect that Jesus may not cooperate with our plans to be happy, that His commands may benefit the kingdom of God but all I will get in return is misery.

3. A third challenge to embracing submission is that I have been betrayed so often by friends and others in authority that I am reluctant to trust any who even hint at the idea that I ought to submit. My pain of past hurts leads me to be suspicious of any one who expects obedience or submission to their will. My pain can lead me to reject the authority of God, His Word, the leading of the Holy Spirit, godly leaders, and my own circumstances.

4. My testimony is this: Whenever I have practiced the discipline of submitting to God and His ways, regardless of the circumstances, I have been blessed. When I have resisted that act and worked the circumstance or issue by own way, I have found anxiety, pain, and restlessness nights. So I am learning the better way of submission to the Lord.

E. The Practices – How does one submit? If you are very confident in your own self and independent in spirit this spiritual practice may be totally foreign to you. You may even be clueless as to how you might begin to practice submission in your relationship with God.

Allow me to suggest some ideas to you.

Idea One: Submit Your Circumstances to the Lord

1. Begin to make it your custom to consider what God thinks about the stuff in your life. Ephesians 5:10 says, “find out what pleases the Lord.” This is good counsel. As you saturate your life with the scripture the Spirit of God will have more room to nudge or poke you when issues arise.

2. Is there an issue you are struggling with, that has been causing you grief? When you discover what pleases the Lord, then submit to Him and what wait to see what He does in you and the circumstances.

Idea Two: Submit Your Actions to Another

The Lord uses other people in our lives to grow us up in His grace. God told Hagar to return to Sarah and submit to her even though Sarah was harsh and mean toward her.

Consider a character flaw you would like God to do something about. What spiritual practice might help you cooperate with God in seeing this part of you transformed into Christ-likeness? Now willingly practice this for a period of time and make yourself accountable to a trusted friend. Submit to their encouragement.

Another way to do this is enlist a godly person to be your spiritual coach and grant them authority to give your spiritual direction. You grant them authority when you submit to their direction and counsel.

Idea Three: Look for Ways to Give Others Their Preference.

Next time you are deciding upon a place to eat, what movie to see, a place to visit on your holidays, allow others to have their way. Make an intentional decision to give way to them and do so with joy. Life in your church family will present you with many opportunities to grant others their preference.

So this is the discipline of submission. It is my prayer that you will discover the joy of submitting to God in all things.

Allow me to move on to the Sabbath.

1. The Sabbath is the day that God has given to us for renewal, refreshment and worship.

Our culture has, however, taken this day and sought to make it like all the other days, a day for commerce, for sport, for amusement, and for work. And many have us have been so overwhelmed by our culture that we have believed it is in our best interest to be able to work and produce and amuse ourselves for every day of the week. And so we live in a constant state of weariness moving from one event to another, from one experience to another, from one task to another, all the time becoming more and more weary.

As result, Sunday is no longer Sabbath, it is just another day. It is not different than all the rest of the days, it no longer belongs to God, it is another day that has been given over to the trivial, the mundane, and the ordinary.

2. In Matthew 11: 28 - 29, Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will

find rest for your souls”. Rest for one’s soul . . . wouldn’t that be great? But that is what a day off is for – rest. Actually, a day off is usually spent working. It is just a different kind of work. Nowhere in the Bible is there a day off. But there is a Sabbath. And it comes as a regular rhythm in life every 6 days. Every 6 days of work there is to be a day that is different, a day that renews life rather than a day that depletes life.

I suspect that for many of us, even those of us who love God passionately, Sunday, our Sabbath, has become just as full and busy as the other 6 days of the week. And church is an activity that is calendared into life like a dentist appointment or getting taxes done or meeting someone for lunch.

So today, I want us to think about our practice of Sabbath based upon the scriptures. I would like to inspire you to figure out how to obey God in this manner and makes plans to practice a Sabbath rest so that you might benefit from it in the way God intended.

A. The Priority of the Sabbath.

1. Let’s go back to the beginning. The Bible says that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . . God creates for 6 days and then He is finished. What does He do on the 7th day? The Bible tells us. In Genesis 2: 2-3 it says, “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”

Now you may remember that on the 6th day God had created man and woman. They were given the task of working the Garden of Eden. But 1st things 1st. Adam and Eve are created on day 6. On day 7 the 1st full day of their existence what are they to do? Work? No. They participate with God in the Sabbath day. They rest.

2. The Sabbath is a gift. We do not work for it or earn it. We rest, and then we work out of the energy and vitality that comes from the rest of Sabbath. Work did not come 1st. Sabbath did. Sabbath has priority and God made it so.

God has given us the Sabbath as a gift from which we are renewed and strengthened for the next 6 days. It is this Sabbath plan that ensures that we will have the energy and joy for living the next 6 days. The word Sabbath means “cease.” And when we cease or stop, then we can go. If we fail to give Sabbath priority and cease every 6 days then eventually we will cease in a way that makes it difficult to go again. That ceasing is called burnout, breakdown, or crash. Or something similar. The Sabbath’s priority is clearly meant for our good. And Jesus even says as much when He declares that the Sabbath was made for man.

3. The priority of the Sabbath is also seen in Exodus 20. It is here that God gives the 10 commandments to His people. These commandments are to guide and shape their lives. Exodus 20: 8 – 11 says, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

Have you noticed how serious we are about the other 9 commandments but that this one, the one that comes before you shall not murder, steal, commit adultery, lie, and covet is readily forgotten and neglected? The Sabbath is to have priority.

4. Even Jesus kept the Sabbath. It was a priority for Him. The Sabbath was a worship day and that day always found Him in the temple or synagogue. Luke 4:16 says, “He went to Nazareth, where he had

been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read.” Note that Luke tells us that it was Jesus’ custom to be at the synagogue on the Sabbath.

5. The Sabbath must be given priority in our lives. It had priority for God, He ordered life that way and made it one of the 10 commandments. And Jesus kept it also although in the minds of his enemies he broke the Sabbath. It was given for our benefit and so we would do well to give priority to that which God has given priority.

B. The Practice of the Sabbath

1. Now if we are to give the Sabbath priority we must learn how to stop. Primarily this stopping is from work but it can also include things like worry and anxiety as well. But for the moment let’s think about the work part. Let me suggest a definition: To cease working on the Sabbath means to quit laboring at anything that is work. Activity that is enjoyable and not undertaken for the purpose of accomplishment is not work. Anything that comes with a must, a have to, ought, or a should, is work.

That means if you have to go to the store, or you must change the oil in your car, or you should vacuum, or you ought to mow the lawn and weed the garden – that is work and thereby not Sabbath activity.

God commanded the Israelites, who were an agrarian society, that if it was the Sabbath they were not to work their fields. Neither were they to gather wood or food. They were to rest from their labours.

2. Our innate desire to produce and accomplish tasks sometimes drives us at a frenzied pace. And we try to use producing and accomplishing as a means to satisfy that deep longing for significance in life. “What do you do?” Are you somebody important? Do you add value to our society? We judge others according to what they add, according to what they do.

God doesn’t value us because we produce or accomplish work. Remember, we did not earn a Sabbath rest. It is a gift just as His love is a gift. It is His love that gives us value, significance and worth.

3. So Sabbath means ceasing from work but it also is intended to be a time to cease from anxiety and worry. One of the by-products of our age is stress and it is killing us. Stress is an emotional response to events and circumstances that act physically upon the body. Good stress moves the body to act. Too much stress can be destructive and results in ulcers, high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke. The Sabbath is a day to be at peace. When we connect with God we are reminded that He watches over us and nothing happens to us that He does not permit. We can trust His provision for He is faithful and His mercies are new every morning. He is the One who brings the right and proper perspective to life enabling me to relax.

4. When we practice the Sabbath it becomes a weekly reminder that ultimately, I do not, I cannot, look after myself. God illustrated this truth weekly for the Israelites while they were in the wilderness. You remember God fed them manna from heaven and they were to collect each day just what they needed for that day. If they collected more than what they needed for the next day they woke to find it full of maggots. So each day they collected just enough for that day. Except on the day prior to the Sabbath they were to collect 2 days worth because God did not want them to work on the Sabbath. On that day they could collect a 2 day supply and when they awoke on the Sabbath the manna was good to eat. God provided for their needs during the week and on the Sabbath.

Giving the Sabbath priority in your life so that you cease from work and worry and trust God is in the end an act of faith. It is act of faith because we say to Him, “Okay we trust that you knew we needed this rest and believe you so much that we will shape our living by ceasing every 6 days to celebrate Sabbath. We will make it a time of worship and rest. We will not fill it with the activity of the other 6

days. And when we feel pressured by the demands of the other 6 days, when they want to break in and use this sacred time for their own ends, we will deny them that right. For Sabbath has priority. And so we will trust you God to help us in the 6 days do all that is necessary for the living of life.”

And in that act of faith we begin to experience the joy and delight of Sabbath. It becomes a day different from all other days because it is not full of the labour and work of the other six days; because it is not full of the stress and the worry and anxiety that comes from a life striving to get it all done; it is instead full of the peace and rest that comes from spending it with God and allowing His presence to revitalize life.

C. Now allow me to give you some specific ideas for practicing the Sabbath.

1. Set aside a 24 hour period for your practice of the Sabbath. The Jews set aside Friday 6 PM until Saturday 6 PM. If Sunday is your best choice for a Sabbath day begin at 6 PM Saturday evening. This will ensure you have what God intended instead of the half Sabbath that getting up Sunday and going to bed Sunday will provide. And if you begin Sabbath with an evening meal and end the next day with the evening meal that allows you the rest of that evening to ready yourself for the new week of work.
2. Plan the Sabbath as a family unit. This means discussing how the Sabbath will impact the 6 days prior to it and the day itself. For example, in discussing the part about ceasing from work, it will mean students in your family will need to get their homework done prior to the Sabbath's start, meals will need to be prepared for the Sabbath day, and whatever household and work related chores that are necessary for the following day will need to be completed prior to the Sabbath. You will also need to plan for some mental adjustments. Being content with a kitchen that is less clean than usual may be one of those adjustments. Sabbath is a time to cease from work. Releasing such concerns about cleanliness or the tasks of the coming week ahead will be part of the adjustment in order that the Sabbath be a true rest. True Sabbath will not occur without planning and work.
3. Make worship, rest, food, family, and friends part of your Sabbath day. This is not meant to be a dull, boring, nothing happening sort of day. It is meant to be different in that there is rest and worship but it is to be full of joy too. Engage in those things that bring refreshment to the different dimensions of your life, that is, to the physical, emotional, and spiritual parts of who you are. Go for a hike, have friends over for a simple meal, play games, and serve others with love.
4. Do be intentional and serious about giving the Sabbath priority but do not be legalistic. Remember that the Sabbath was made for you not you for the Sabbath. If something comes up that violates your usual Sabbath practice, work with it and return to your usual practice the following week.
5. Finally, invite God to share in the Sabbath day with you. A Sabbath rest without God may leave you physically rested but spiritually and emotionally unprepared for the next 6 days. The renewal that comes with Sabbath comes most completely when you share that time with Him. You may want to consider beginning and ending your Sabbath with a time of scripture and prayer in which you first give the Sabbath to God and then end with thanks for the blessings of the Sabbath and petition God for the week ahead.

D. Conclusion

The Sabbath is a gift from God that enables us to go the distance and finish well. It is meant to refresh and renew us for life. It creates space where we can be loved, nourished, and resourced by God without distraction. God has not meant for you to live out of weariness. The Sabbath is His plan to help you live life, love Him, and serve others with the energy and joy that He best provides.

May you know His rest as you practice the spiritual discipline of Sabbath.
Amen.