

What are Spiritual Practices?

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There is an old story told of a farmer who was working in his fields one day when man galloped by on his horse. The farmer yelled out to the man, “*Where are you going?*” The rider shouted back, “*Don’t ask me, ask my horse!*”

If we do not have a sense of where we’re headed in our lives and a way of getting there, we can be a bit like the rider on the horse and end up anywhere. This is true of our spiritual lives as any other part of our lives.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church disciples of Christ have been introduced to spiritual practices (perhaps more usually known as spiritual disciplines) as a way to give guidance and direction to their spiritual growth; the deepening of a person’s relationship with God, being formed in the image of Christ (Galatians 4:19) and being open to the God’s Spirit within us.

Why do we need spiritual practices?

There could be many answers to this question, and any answer could be a long one. While much could be said, for me there are two main responses to this question.

Firstly, we need spiritual practices because of the nature of the human person. We live in a world, at least in our western world, which diminishes or ignores the role of the spiritual in our lives. We live in a very health conscious world. We know we need to

look after our bodies with exercise, good food and rest. We need to look after our mental health through appropriate thinking patterns, relaxation and mental stimulation amongst other ways.

But most people sense that this is not enough, that there is more to ‘me’ than just the body and the mind. This is the realm of the spiritual and it too needs care and attention if it is going to be healthy. Unhappily, we do not always respond to the spiritual needs of our being.

“The spiritual dimension cannot be ignored for it is what makes us human.” Victor Frankl

Secondly, the human person, being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), is made for relationship with God. As with any relationship, our relationship with God needs to be worked on for it to grow and develop. This is the role of spiritual practices.

In the Christian tradition the understanding is that this relationship is made possible because of God’s desire to be in relationship with us and is nurtured through God’s continual love expressed towards us. This is the action of grace, God’s extravagant loving kindness which is always extended to us.

Spiritual practices are the work we undertake through which we place ourselves in a position to be open to that grace.

Think of it like gardening. We know that the gardener cannot produce the life that enables a plant to grow. But what he/she can do is create the conditions that make the growth of the plant to its full maturity more possible. Spiritual practices are the work of producing an environment that is more conducive to our spiritual growth. They are activities which help us respond to God's grace and allow our relationship with God to develop.

"You have made us for yourself and our souls are restless until they rest in you."

St. Augustine

What are spiritual practices?

Spiritual practices then, are any activity which we undertake to help nurture our relationship with God, the spiritual dimension of our being. We are always in relationship with God, whether we realise it or not, but spiritual practices help us awaken to the reality of God in our lives and then to live out of that awareness.

In that sense spiritual practices can be anything that helps nurture our relationship with God. If you stop for a moment and think about it you can probably call to mind some practices in which you are already engaged. You might think of Sunday worship, bible reading, prayer or fellowship with others. But the list of practices that enables the development of our relationship with God is almost endless. Indeed, it might be said that the number of practices could be as great as the number of people on the planet. That is because our relationship with God is a very personal thing, and who we are as an individual will shape the practices that are meaningful for us. What will help one person may not help another. That doesn't make it right or wrong. The important point is to identify practices that we can sustain and that will help our growth with God.

Over the period of the Church's history there are, however, a number of practices that have been found to be especially helpful:

- worship
- spiritual reading
- prayer (and there are many ways to pray)
- meditation
- fasting
- study
- solitude
- silence
- simplicity
- journaling
- hospitality
- self-examination
- service....

.....indeed the list is endless.

How do we know what is right for us? Simply, try a few and see what practices work for you. You might like to do this while reflecting with a spiritual director, another spiritual practice.

Remember, it is not the doing of the practice that matters. Practices are only tools to help us nurture our relationship with God- and that is what matters.

On this website you will find a number of sheets which will give you an introduction to some spiritual practices. And if you want to talk with someone about this, please feel free to contact Stillpoint Spirituality

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