

# Practical Insights into the Minister's Spiritual Growth

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By inviting me to give a presentation on the subject of our spiritual growth you are likely giving at least some indication that you are aware of a danger or a need in this aspect of our Christian walk. You are also likely expressing the conviction that there are rewards or benefits for us and our ministries that are being forfeited, and that we can do better to foster our own spiritual growth. If so, I wholeheartedly agree with your presuppositions and commend you for placing the subject on your conference agenda.

By using the words “practical insights” you also seem to be saying that you already know many theoretical truths about this subject, but you find it more difficult to put them into action on a consistent basis. You are seeking counsel or helpful hints on how to turn ideas into actions. If so, I again agree with your thinking, with one clarification: Bible truth, even if classifiable as abstract or theoretical, is essentially practical. The ancient adage holds true: *Whatever is theological is practical.*

My only point of possible disagreement with you pertains to the selection of me as the presenter of this material. My efforts at promoting my own spiritual growth have too often been halfhearted and inconsistent. My sins in this regard are many and grievous, and to pretend otherwise would be falsehood. But perhaps for that reason I may be of some value to you at this time. The Apostle Paul, identifying himself as “the worst of sinners,” also confesses, “I was shown mercy” and saw himself as a useful display of Christ’s “unlimited patience” so that other sinners would be encouraged and saved (Cf. 1 Tm 1:16). In a limited yet parallel way I freely confess my failures at cultivating my own spiritual growth, but I testify to the mercy and unlimited patience of my Lord Jesus and point you to him. He has kept the subject of spiritual growth prominent on my personal agenda, has allowed me many times to rethink the issues involved and to look for “practical insights” to stimulate such growth in my own life. In the limited time allotted today, I shall try to share some of this with you and invite each of you to share similar insights with the assembled group.

***Practical Insight # 1: Personal spiritual growth is an essential part of your calling as a Christian. It is not optional. So don't waste time and energy approaching it halfheartedly. It unrelentingly demands your attention and commitment.***

“I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day” (2 Tm 1:12). We know very well that Paul could have said, “I know what I believe,” and we also know why he didn't. God revealed the gospel of Christ to Paul—and to us—not merely as an abstract and objective truth, but as the basis of an intensely personal relationship with the Lord Jesus himself. The person of Christ cannot be separated from the gospel; he embodies it. [Cf. Jn 1:17, “The law was *given* (ἐδόθη) through Moses; grace and truth came (ἐγένετο) through Jesus Christ.] In inviting, encouraging, and commanding us to devote ourselves to his Word and Sacraments, our Lord has in mind the increase of our knowing him, not only our knowledge of objective and orthodox truth.<sup>1</sup> Everything else in our spiritual lives comes from that center like spokes radiating from a wheel. Without this integral characteristic, our Christian life, as it has been said, is little more than a night in a second-class hotel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. August Pieper develops this thought more fully in “Paul, A Model of the Certainty of Faith, especially for all Servants of the Word.” This article has been translated and presented in the July 1975 issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.

<sup>2</sup> I believe Theresa of Avila is commonly credited with this picturesque analogy. I take the words to mean that we are simultaneously not really at home and not as satisfied about that as we could or should be.

Therefore, to treat the call to grow spiritually as something optional or only a comparatively high priority in life is folly. It is practical insight to acknowledge this is an inherent aspect of a biblically defined and described Christian lifestyle. This is the key to the preservation as well as the enrichment of faith. We can be fussily busy about holy things yet lose the sense of awe concerning our holy Lord. We can have much to do with religion, yet not be religious as God defines it. We may indicate the way to others but not be found in it. We may be professors but not pilgrims.

Am I making my point clear? Too many times I have retreated from halfhearted attempts at cultivating personal spiritual growth and then soothed my conscience with thoughts similar to these: “Personal growth is indeed a high and noble goal, and it merits some place on my list of priorities—but I’ll address the issue another day, at a more convenient time.” The truth, however, is that the primary culprit was not stress, time management, workaholism, or schedule conflicts, but poor theology and unacceptable rebellion against the truth. Rather than waiting for adequate time and quiet, my obligation all along was to be firm in repenting, take responsibility for my sin, recall the unchanging nature of my forgiving Lord and his commands, and immediately take up the task as both duty and delight. Unless I face this fact little or no progress will be made. How can busy Christians find time and energy for spiritual growth activities? How can they not? How can auto mechanics find time and energy to work on an automobile? That is what they are and do.

Perhaps at this point I should state what is perhaps already assumed in our midst, but is never to be taken for granted. True spiritual growth is accomplished by the Holy Spirit through our use of the gospel in Word and Sacrament.<sup>3</sup> The role of prayer is also not to be neglected.

To use an illustration: you still have one or two matches in your pocket, which a patient and faithful God has preserved intact for you...*One of these matches is prayer.* Yes, prayer...Is not the promise specifically recorded for us that God will give us his Holy Spirit in answer to our prayers?...*Thus the promise must be fulfilled in us, if God is not to become a liar...*The Lord has promised us sufficient Spirit and power, and more than sufficient for the glorification and perfection of his church; and he will give it to us, if we do not cease praying for it. That is the one means for a real reconstruction of the church.

*The other means is the new life in the revealed Word, in the gospel, in the Scripture...*God gives his Spirit and faith to no one except through the external Word. The farmer can be on his knees 24 hours a day asking God for bread, but he will receive none, if he does not prepare his field according to the requirements of nature and work diligently at it. God performs no miracles unnecessarily; for that he has no time.

In spiritual matters it is exactly so. No prayer for the Holy Spirit will accomplish anything if it does not immediately rise from its knees and help to plow the field on which the bread of life, of the spirit grows—the gospel, the Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps now it may more clearly be seen why the matter of personal spiritual growth is not optional or merely one priority among others. I have learned, too often the hard way, that the devotional life is primarily to be viewed from the standpoint of *God’s devotion to me* rather than my devotion to him. You should too. Don’t waste time and energy thinking otherwise.

***Practical Insight #2: Personal spiritual growth is an essential part of your calling as a minister of the gospel. It is not optional. It is required of you as a overseer among God’s people apart from the tasks***

<sup>3</sup> It is especially valuable to identify true means of grace since a many contemporary “spiritual growth” emphases are quite undiscerning. A “*spirituality*” of the seeking process is often the goal, with no particular stress on the Spirit’s chosen tools. This contributes to the phenomenon of so many having a patchwork of doctrine that may be quite blasphemous but still laying claim to being “spiritual.”

<sup>4</sup> August Pieper, “The True Reconstruction of the Church,” *The Wauwatosa Theology, III*, 317-318. This entire essay merits our attention, and it is hoped that everyone here will read or reread it. Italics not added.

**involved in that calling. So, again, don't waste time and energy approaching it halfheartedly. It unrelentingly demands your attention and commitment.**

This practical point is similar to the previous one, but different enough to be considered on its own. Sometimes we may distinguish between things required of all Christians and things required of those who desire to carry out the “noble task” (καλοῦ ἔργου) of public gospel ministry. To my shame I also have said, “I’m not the Christian I should be in this, but I can still be the called worker that I should be.” But when we say that personal spiritual growth is not an inherent part of being the kind of gospel minister that God desires, we deceive ourselves.

Even a brief consideration of certain ministerial attitudes or inner characteristics (aside from the performance of ministerial tasks) will reveal how necessary spiritual growth is for anyone who seeks to serve as a public minister. For example:

- The attribute of *faithfulness* is certainly required (1 Co 4:1-2). On this subject, we listen again to what Professor Pieper has to say:

But what does it mean to be faithful in the ministry? That is very simple: it means to do what you can, to work “with the strength God provides” (1 Pe 4:11)...Above all, faithfulness requires a heart that is faithful to God and to those entrusted to his care; the sincere concern, that the whole gracious will of God toward his flock be done, the heartfelt concern for the salvation of every soul entrusted to him...

Even more than that is involved in true faithfulness in the ministry...[There is also] the inner concern before God as to how one may become a better, more skillful, wiser, more efficient, more capable servant of the Lord.

And the most important part of *true* faithfulness in the ministry is finally this *that one cares even more for his own soul than for the souls of others!*<sup>5</sup>

- A robust *faith* in divine promises, a God-given *certainty of faith* is essential for the church and her leaders. Personal doubts about the truth of the gospel, the inspiration, clarity, and sufficiency of Scripture, the exclusiveness and inclusiveness of Christianity, and the orthodoxy of Lutheranism do not cease when we graduate and receive formal calls into the ministry. Without spiritual growth we fall prey to doubt and unbelief and ultimately disqualify ourselves from the office.
- Sometimes we are tempted to confuse spiritual knowledge or confessional orthodoxy with *spiritual strength* and fervency of our *faith life*. “A mistake many people make is to imagine that our spiritual strength will be in direct proportion to the amount of spiritual knowledge we possess.”<sup>6</sup> Spiritual growth serves the greater, but never at the expense of the lesser.
- Finally, the chief attribute of *love* is necessarily linked to personal spiritual growth as the Holy Spirit nurtures and nourishes the gospel minister. Without that virtue even the most eloquent preacher and teacher among us remains only a noisemaker (1 Co 13:1) and unworthy of the office. But from start to finish, Christlike love is given to me as I grow spiritually. Pastors and teachers need to learn and wholeheartedly embrace God’s appraisal of his sheep and lambs and lovingly feed and nourish them toward maturity. Even when firm rebuke and correction is called for, love remains the essential motive. And regarding the goats? They’re in no short supply, especially beyond the confines of our parishes. Do I view them as the beloved enemy? Do I possess a God-like desire to serve them with the gospel? In these matters personal growth is hardly optional. To illustrate the wonderful and practical nature of this attribute for those who work with fellow sinners on a regular basis, we hear Martin Luther.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 308-309. Italics not added.

<sup>6</sup> August Pieper, “Paul, A Model of the Certainty of Faith,” p. 240.

What is the world other than a great heap of such people who neither trust God, nor fear Him, nor love Him, nor praise Him, nor thank Him. They misuse all creatures, blaspheme His name, despise His Word. Moreover, they are disobedient, murders, adulterers, thieves and scoundrels, liars, traitors, full of unfaithfulness and all wicked malice. In short, they are transgressors of all commands and in all things refractory and rebellious; they depend on the enemy of God, the devil himself...

If I were God, I would wish to and I would give the world hellish fire on their heads. That I would do. But what does God do? Instead of his wrath, which the world has full well deserved, He has loved the world, and in such a superabundant and inconceivable manner that he gave His only Son for the world, his worst enemies.<sup>7</sup>

More may be said, but perhaps enough has been said to make the point. Personal spiritual growth is an essential part of our calling as gospel ministers. It is not optional. It is required of us apart from the tasks involved in our ministries. So let's do the practical thing and not waste time and energy approaching it halfheartedly. It unrelentingly demands our attention and commitment.

***Practical Insight #3: Personal spiritual growth is an essential element of fulfilling your role as a minister of the gospel. It is not optional. Without it, you are not sufficient for the tasks involved. So, again, don't waste time and energy approaching it halfheartedly. It unrelentingly demands your attention and commitment.***

We now briefly consider the work of a called worker aside from the personal traits of the worker. The office of the minister of the gospel is not primarily a position or an entitlement; it is a *work* to be done ("office" is derived from *opus facere*). God's desire is clear. We are to "discharge all the duties of [our] ministry" (τὴν διακονίαν πληροφόρησον). In the wake of various failed attempts to maintain my personal devotional life, I have told myself that even though I was not the ideal Christian or the perfect called worker, my ability to carry out my assigned tasks remained pretty much intact. I had learned skills and could perform them almost out of habit. But I was not being honest with myself or with the Lord who assigned those tasks to me. It is practical insight not even to think about separating spiritual growth from doing ministry.

We must limit ourselves to a few examples of how spiritual growth is essential to proper fulfilling of ministerial tasks, but these should be enough to illustrate the point.

- Gospel work invariably involves the whole person, taxing one's intellect, heart, and will every step of the way. If our thoughts, emotions, and desires are not taken captive to Christ, centered in him, and made subject to his will, we and those we would serve pay heavy prices. For the called worker there is the danger of undue stress, burnout, self-pity, and many other maladies all too familiar in our circles. Over against those being served, hostile feelings frequently surface and a "control mindset" [e.g., pastor as CEO or drill sergeant] takes hold. Whatever may be said about these phenomena, they do not constitute gospel ministry as the Bible defines and describes it. But without spiritual growth, this is what ministry is usually destined to become.
- "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tm 6:6), but the tendency to be less than satisfied mushrooms when spiritual health and growth is missing. Finances are by no means the only contributing factor. Centuries ago, St. Hilary spoke out against what he saw as an increasingly prevalent *irreligiosa sollicitudo pro Deo* among church leaders, an almost blasphemous anxiety to do God's work for him. I recall reading somewhere that hyperactivity in the church is to gospel ministry what junk food is to a nourishing diet. It gives the feeling of satisfaction while starving the person to death. And how might a

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by August Pieper, "The Despising of Grace is the Death of the Church," EF 845, pp. 3-4.

servant of the gospel avoid excessive busyness? Only by knowing the mind and heart of God well enough to distinguish the real from the counterfeit. That’s precisely why spiritual growth is essential to doing the work right.

- It is being said that in many ways our generation of ministers is going through particularly difficult times. The reference is usually to the fulfillment of the “signs of the times” that Jesus pointed to when alerting his followers to the approaching end of the world (Mt 24, Mk 13, Lk 21). The growing secularization of our nation and the statistical as well as financial plateauing within our synod are also identified as contributing factors. Actually, the church of every age has needed mature leaders who possessed the character, dignity, and wisdom to counter the spirit of their age when it surfaced within as well as outside the visible church boundaries. With great effort we often seem to struggle to break free from the consuming concerns of the world to focus on the Word and prayer, while our Lord Jesus and spiritual giants appeared to follow an opposite pattern. They lived in the Word and prayer then moved from there to enter and serve in the world. A healthy devotional life has been called the “spiritual nosegay.”<sup>8</sup> As true spirituality grows, it becomes an effective means of living and serving faithfully and cheerfully in a world that reeks with the stench of godlessness, foul priorities, and broken lives. For the servant of the Lord who desires to fulfill his or her ministry, spiritual growth is never a luxury, but a necessity.

In saying spiritual growth is a necessity for gospel ministry, I do not want to be understood as saying the power of the gospel in any way depends on the spiritual health of the minister. No preacher, prophet, apostle, teacher, or pastor can add anything to the Word’s ability to accomplish what pleases God, and no creature can rob the Word of that power. The correct teaching is still that God does not want evident spiritually dead people preaching his Word—or anywhere in the church for that matter. It is also true that frivolous, spiritually lethargic, and careless ministers can impair or hinder the working of the Word by failing to convey it accurately, falsely applying it, twisting or rearranging its message improperly, or in some other way obscuring what God intends to say to people.<sup>9</sup>

While examples and illustrations may again be multiplied, I hope the point is adequately made: It is fully impractical and foolish to think we can carry out gospel ministry as our Lord wants it done and yet neglect personal spiritual growth. Both we and those we are called to serve will suffer for our wrong-headedness and hard-heartedness in this matter. So let’s do the practical thing and not waste time and energy approaching the task halfheartedly. It unrelentingly demands our attention and commitment.

***Practical Insight #4: Personal spiritual growth is an essential element of fulfilling your role as a spouse and parent. It is not optional. Without it, you are not sufficient for the tasks involved. So, again, don’t waste time and energy approaching it halfheartedly. It unrelentingly demands your attention and commitment.***

If you are married, you have a calling above and beyond your call into the Christian faith and your call into the public ministry (Note the use of καλέω in 1 Co 7:17, 20, 24). This calling has various responsibilities and privileges that have been determined by the Lord. I confess that I have more than once attempted to compartmentalize my life in such a way that my role as a husband and father was treated as something only loosely related to my efforts to promote my personal spiritual growth. After all, the estate of marriage is a “secular” institution that applies to all people, and the functions to be carried out may well be done adequately without explicit use of the gospel and prayer. In this I was failing to do justice both to the necessity of spiritual

<sup>8</sup> I believe the term has been attributed to St. Francis de Sales. The nosegay was a bouquet of sweet-smelling flowers that ladies carried in the streets of seventeenth century Europe so they could stand the stench of the open sewers along the streets.

<sup>9</sup> August Pieper discusses this point at length in “Paul, A Model of the Certainty of Faith,” fn #3, pp. 247-251. One of his major points is put this way, “*Our personal faith is indispensable for faithfulness in the ministry, but not for making the Word we preach powerful.*”

growth in my life and its importance in empowering me to be the family member God calls me to be. The practical truth is that my spiritual condition has everything to do with my fulfilling my role as spouse and parent in a Christian family. To illustrate this point, the following examples are cited.

- Beyond controversy, families are under assault and are hurting in our society. Upheaval and discord often prevail in issues that touch upon role relationships, mutual respect and trust between spouses, parental discipline, and the measure of respect and obedience children owe to their parents. To think Christian families, or our own families are not influenced to some degree by these ideological struggles is foolishness. And how might we contend for what is right and do so evangelically? How might we accurately and adequately teach and encourage, model and mentor those entrusted to our care in the family? In a way parallel to the construction of God’s house in Jerusalem at the time of Zerubbabel: “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty” (Zch 4:6). The importance of spiritual maturity employed by the Spirit of the Lord is hopefully obvious.
- The frequently cited study dealing with the family trees of Jonathan Edwards and “Max Jukes” memorably offers powerful lessons about the legacy that we leave as fathers (and mothers).<sup>10</sup> Five generations from now, it is likely that our professional accomplishments will be forgotten and our descendants may know very little, if anything, about our lives. But the way we parent will most probably affect not only our children, but also our grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and the generations that follow. This may come as little surprise to those familiar with the words of Ex 20:5 and 34:7, but the message is nevertheless clear—the importance of spiritual values in the home dare not be taken lightly or underestimated.
- I doubt if any among us has not wrestled with priorities and the division of time and energy when seeking to fulfill obligations in our personal, ecclesiastic, and family callings. The general popularity of the following priorities, “#1: God, #2, Family, #3 Job,” remains simplistic and inadequate. So how is one to decide? Circumstances, personal, family, and church needs will vary, but one thing is certain. Whoever has a devotional life that fosters spiritual growth and seeks divine wisdom on a continual basis may have confidence in approaching the dilemma.
- Finally, the impact of a truly spiritual lifestyle is great. Religious devotion—or the lack of it—is almost unavoidably passed on to those close to us. Spouses and children see our attitudes and activities as evidence of a value system—or as mere ritual—to the degree it is consistently grounded in everyday living. We want to be “authentic” and genuine, not bipolar or spurious. A life that is enjoying spiritual growth is equipped to provide what is needed and wanted.

Perhaps we have all periodically surprised ourselves by being less than willing to serve as a true pastor to our own family when spouse or child asked us religious or biblical questions. We can determine some factors that contribute to this poor display of family leadership, but none that excuse us from committing the sin. We can also identify the remedy: spiritual growth. So let’s do the practical thing and not waste time and energy approaching the task halfheartedly. It unrelentingly demands our attention and commitment.

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<sup>10</sup> As I understand it, the study began when the NY Prison Commission employed a Mr. Richard Dugdale in 1874 to visit state prisons. Dugdale was surprised to find criminals in several prisons who were not only related to other prisoners, but (as shown by further investigation) were all descended from the same family unit, that of “Max Jukes” [not his real name], born about 1720. The study was subsequently expanded (at Yale and Princeton) to include about 1,200 of Jukes descendants, as well as the sharply contrasting family of Jonathan Edwards, who was born in 1703. Nearly 1,400 descendants of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards were charted. The findings confirm what sociologists have called the “five-generation rule:” how parents raise their child influences not only the child but the four generations that follow. (In short, the Jukes family purportedly revealed 300 convicts, 27 murderers, 190 prostitutes, 509 alcoholics and drug addicts, etc., while the Edwards progeny had 430 ministers, 130 lawyers and judges, 99 college professors, 13 university presidents, 60 physicians, 11 congressmen and governors, etc.)

***Practical Insight #5: Personal spiritual growth is so much the desire and work of God among his people that it will always have fierce opposition and face extreme adversity in our lives. Never consider it so firmly a part of your lifestyle that it needs little cultivation. Never take it for granted or let up on your resolve to practice it till the day you die.***

“Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short” (Rev 12:12). The person seeking spiritual growth and engaged in a devotional lifestyle is an irresistible target for Satan. The same is true for the unbelieving portion of the world and our own sinful nature. The methods of the unholy trinity are many, but the resultant test of our resolve will be real. Again, to offer a couple of examples:

- Since concentration and thoughtful meditation on God’s Word is so much an ingredient of the devotional lifestyle, we may expect distractions. A heart so used to the exterior life of noise, haste, and commotion cannot easily turn all that off and focus solely on God’s message without much practice. With the limited freedom God allows him, the devil will send obstacles to disrupt the course we’ve undertaken. While we seek to have the comfort and wisdom of God to penetrate our hearts, minds, and wills, the world seeks to penetrate our quiet time, often with notable success. To expect otherwise is to be idealistic.
- In a certain sense, spiritual growth is time consuming. Since the Spirit has chosen to work along psychological norms through his Word, we seek time to have the Word suffuse our consciousness, penetrate our thinking, sift our emotions, and amend our wills. This period of physical, financial, and supposed occupational “inactivity” is abnormal and almost unAmerican (unless it has recreational or entertainment value). Again, there will be struggles and some degree of pain.
- A totally different kind of discomfort might be mentioned here as well. From his study of Psalm 119 Martin Luther postulated that the Lord uses prayer, meditation, and testing (the perhaps more familiar *oratio, meditatio, and tentatio*) in the making of a mature theologian. Pain or discomfort may be involved not only because of spiritual enemies, but also because of a gracious Father’s chosen way of working. As the saying puts it, “God prefers to develop our character, not our comfort; he seeks to perfect, not pamper.”

The key to confronting and overcoming struggles and distractions has to do with our attitude toward them. They are too many to be defeated as one would break a single bad habit. They are manageable when taken on one at a time—when all the while we continue to focus on our Lord’s will and the spiritual growth he promises us. Numerous writers have confirmed that a persistent resolve to occupy ourselves with God and a devotional lifestyle results in many temptations falling away. God comes to our rescue at just the right time, following the pattern mentioned a number of times in Scripture. “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (He 12:10). “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Pe 5:10).

***Practical Insight #6: Personal spiritual growth normally requires initial planning and continual adjustments. Its impact on “lifestyle” should not be underestimated. Auxiliary disciplines will be involved to insure adequate time and place to devote yourself to prayer and meditation. Do not simply assume that all things will work out without your effort. But do not see any necessary steps as insurmountable obstacles.***

With reference to Martin Luther's devotional habits and recommendations, it has been said, "Time and discipline were the two essentials in the method Luther used and suggested for our devotional lives."<sup>11</sup> Aside from the desire and the Word of God, little else is required, although various approaches may call for additional items. Time is perhaps the major commodity that makes or breaks otherwise good intentions. Discipline, especially of one's resolve to persevere despite obstacles, is self-evident. Here is a brief, representative list of things that merit attention as we seek to promote personal spiritual growth.

- *Time management* is increasingly important for many reasons, and the cultivation of a devotional lifestyle is one of them. Ironically, we lack the time to go into much depth on the subject at this time, but there are many books, articles, and essays available to anyone interested. *A decent place to start is often with an analysis of how we currently use our time, and why.* People who are chronically "too busy," "overworked," or are classifiable as "workaholics" usually benefit from an analysis of motives that are involved. All too often unworthy factors are in play: pride (though camouflaged as humility), a sense of inferiority (that is overcompensating with over activity), unbelief (which won't trust God so must act on its own), guilt (driving the person to be better and work harder), or insecurity (questioning one's qualifications or sees an uncertainty in one's position). There may also be a sincere, genuine love for God and mankind that is more zealous than wise. *Another kind of analysis is usually in place, that of how we manage or mismanage available time.* Common time-wasters include: disorganization, procrastination, perfectionism, failure to delegate, poor diet and health habits, failure to say No, all work and no play, TV or computer addiction, or failure to adapt to or control technology in general. *A basic understanding of (and willingness to employ) proven time management techniques is an auxiliary discipline of great value.* Sample disciplines would be: the use of written schedules, distinguishing between the important and the urgent, the clustering of work and devoting a block of time for a given project, and the tackling of the more difficult (or least enjoyable) tasks first.<sup>12</sup> The management of time is not an end in itself, but a discipline that helps to enable us to devote time to priority activities, in this case, spiritual growth activities.
- The subject of *physical and mental rest* frequently surfaces in discussions of "how" to best meet a person's needs. But to prescribe a set of rules is folly. Some (rightly) point to events in Christ's life to show *the legitimacy and value of rest and relaxation.* Changes of pace were certainly on his agenda. Others (also rightly) cite references to show Christ's zeal and how he laid himself open to charges of lunacy for his torrid pace (Cf. Mk 3:20-21). He struck the perfect balance but left us no formula or canon law to guide us. The prayer for wisdom in this matter will surely be a part of our spiritual growth program.
- There are no absolutes or divine commands pertaining to *the duration and frequency* of our "quiet times," devotional periods, or spiritual growth activities, as well as *when and where* they will take place on a given day. *A blend of firmness and flexibility* is normally needed in setting such personal criteria. *Maintain balance and avoid artificial standards.* It is quite possible God wants us to read and ponder a psalm a day for the rest of our lives. It is also quite possible he doesn't. Luke 5:16 ("But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.") not only informs us of our Lord's habitual pattern, but it reminds us that it was not necessarily a *daily* habit or pattern. *Frequency and regularity* are as much as we can insist upon in such matters. In establishing devotional goals, we do well to remain open to different paths and seek some variety within the parameters of using that which edifies and enriches. As in one's prayer life in general, longer is not necessarily better. I recall reading words that basically said, "When you know someone loves you and is intimately interested in you, it doesn't require many words to communicate adequately. A quiet sign, a glance, a little suggestion—God will understand." This kind

<sup>11</sup> Richard Lauersdorf, "Teach Me to Love Thy Sacred Word," essay dated June, 1987 and delivered in Watertown, WI, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> One of my favorite sayings in this regard is this one: "Problem-solving is like eating frogs. If you have to eat a frog, don't spend all day looking at him. And if there are several frogs to be eaten, start with the big one."



of reminder may bring a great calm to our prayers, for we do not need long, well-phrased speeches. We rest on God’s love for us and rejoice that he knows us better than we know ourselves.

- *Journaling* is a practice recommended by many, but it doesn’t work for everyone. What St. Augustine, John Wesley, David Brainerd, or Jim Elliot did well, we may or may not do as we may desire. There are helpful books to serve those interested.
- The *use of the Bible itself* is a given; *supplemental books and materials* are up to the individual to use or not use. We have such a legacy of fine auxiliary writings and devotional aids—and all have their place among us. Select judiciously to fit your goals and ability to derive benefit from each. But keep the Bible itself central. As Luther said regarding his own books, they are merely crates for the Holy Scriptures. We do not wish to learn the Scriptures primarily through second hand teaching, but have been equipped to drink deep and taste the Pierian Spring provided for us through the prophets and apostles.
- *Methods of meditating on and applying the Word to ourselves are many*, and each will have its benefits just as each person will have his favorites. Some variety is likely useful over a period of time. Luther’s “simple way to pray” is good advice for us as it was for his barber.<sup>13</sup> To “pray through” the Scriptures, turning declarations into confessions and petitions section by section, is a proven approach. The all-important attitude is appropriately highlighted by Professor Pieper with these words:

Whoever wants to study the Scriptures properly and with blessing (so that he himself become illuminated, warmed, and filled with the Holy Spirit and with power from on high) *must above all read, search, meditate, and study for his own heart, for his own edification and strengthening*, with the prayer that ever recurs in the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm: Lord, teach me, instruct me, show me, lead me, strengthen me, open my eyes, that I may see the wonders of your law! This must be done in this sense: Incline my heart to your testimony; refresh me with your righteousness; let me experience your grace; my soul longs for your salvation. Scripture study in this sense alone is true, wholesome, fruitful, and fills one with the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

When people refer to “practical advice” regarding how to establish and maintain a devotional lifestyle, they usually have in mind things that we have just briefly addressed. These points have their place, but it is not in the highest priority position. What was given earlier as “practical insights” prior to this section are considered by this writer as of greater value. When someone is resolved and resolute to undertake and promote personal spiritual growth, advice and materials are not difficult to obtain. Being brought to the resolute and unwavering resolve—that is the primary challenge.

***Practical Insight #7: Personal spiritual growth is increasingly rewarding; our joy grows with the experiencing of it. So in a real way, when we take our initial steps toward this discipline, “we walk by faith, not by sight.” Do not take the promises of the Lord lightly. Anticipate and give thanks in advance for the blessings you will receive.***

As we know, the Bible compares spiritual growth to physical growth and development (for example, in Ephesians 4:13-16, Hebrews 5:12, 1 Peter 2:2). Since we are familiar with physical growth, we find the analogy helpful as we try to envision spiritual growth that is essentially inward and invisible—and therefore more difficult to chart despite some telltale indicators. A particularly valuable lesson may also be learned here. Physical development is a pretty slow process in many ways. Though spurts of physical growth may occasionally be seen, growth is usually so slow that it is almost imperceptible from day to day. A daily look in

<sup>13</sup> To make sure there is no misunderstanding: the reference here is Luther’s recommended use of basic catechetical material by weaving a “garland of four twisted strands” [teaching, thanksgiving, confession, prayer]. We may find this helpful to work through the Bible as well as through the Catechism.

<sup>14</sup> August Pieper, “The True Reconstruction of the Church,” p. 319.

the mirror seldom reveals distinctive changes—but we are nevertheless changing more than we may realize. So also spiritual growth occurs steadily and unobtrusively, as a part of the flow of our lives. With this in mind, we pause to make a few final observations or insights.

- People who seek quick, “sure-fire” solutions to spiritual weakness and ten swift steps to spiritual strength will find the Lord’s deliberate pace frustrating. It is a practical insight to be alert to this attitude and to reject it in ourselves. When we lack a sense of progress or find we cannot calculate how much time or energy it will take to reach an imagined goal, it is easy to lose motivation. At that point we may turn to shortcuts and artificial solutions that are really counterproductive to true growth. Insight based on the wisdom that comes from heaven will recognize the folly in doing so.
- It is in place to remind ourselves that measurable results are not only elusive, but are not really our goal in spiritual growth. Conformity to the image of God’s Son is one way to state our goal, of course, but attempts to measure progress in that direction or to determine specific plateaus reached during that pilgrimage are doomed to failure. For all practical purposes we may say that the faithful use of the means of grace is the goal as well as the means of spiritual growth.
- William Law, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Puritan writer, expressed this observation in his book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*:

The more we discover God in everything, the more we seek him in every place, the more we look up to him in all our actions, the more we conform to his will, the more we act according to his wisdom and imitate his goodness, so much the more we enjoy God. Then we share in the divine nature and heighten and increase all that is happy and comfortable in human life.<sup>15</sup>

Many others in the history of the church have similarly testified to the joy that results from knowing and doing God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will. We anticipate that any increase in true spiritual growth will whet our appetite for more of the same. With respect to this very point, Meister Eckhart, when asked why people are reluctant to seek God in earnest, made this comment:

When one is looking for something and sees no sign that it is where he is searching, he will keep on looking there only with painful reluctance. If, however, he begins to find traces of it, then he will hunt in earnest. The man who wants fire is cheered by feeling warm, and then joyously looks for the blaze.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately we may anticipate joy and satisfaction because “the precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. . . They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb” (Ps 19:8,10). As stated earlier, the devotional life is primarily to be viewed from the standpoint of *God’s devotion to us* rather than our devotion to him. That is the most practical insight of all, worthy of constant repetition. It is precisely why we take seriously the call to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.” (2 Pe 3:18)

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Luder G. Whitlock, Jr., *The Spiritual Quest*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Nooks, 2000), p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> Johannes “Meister” Eckhart, ca 1260-1327, is commonly called the “father of German mysticism.” We do well, however to recall that the form of mysticism advocated by him and his age was more serious about the use of Scripture and less subjective than more modern forms of mysticism. This brand of mysticism was representative of that in the collection of mystical writings contained in the *Theologica Germanica*, which Luther edited and helped popularize in his lifetime.