

5. THE DISCIPLINE OF STUDY

He that studies only men, will get the body of knowledge without the soul; and he that studies only books, the soul without the body. He that to what he sees, adds observation, and to what he reads, reflection, is in the right road to knowledge, provided that in scrutinizing the hearts of others, he neglects not his own.

—CALEB COLTON

The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total transformation of the person. They aim at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the Discipline of study. The apostle Paul tells us that we are transformed through the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2). The mind is renewed by applying it to those things that will transform it. "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these things*" (Phil. 4:8, [italics added]). The Discipline of study is the primary vehicle to bring us to "*think about these things*." Therefore, we should rejoice that we are not left to our own devices but have been given this means of God's grace for the changing of our inner spirit.

Many Christians remain in bondage to fears and anxieties simply because they do not avail themselves of the Discipline of study. They may be faithful in church attendance and earnest in fulfilling their religious duties, and still they are not changed. I am not here speaking only of those who are going through mere religious forms, but of those who are genuinely seeking to worship and obey Jesus Christ as Lord and Master. They may sing with gusto, pray in the Spirit, live as obediently

as they know, even receive divine visions and revelations, and yet the tenor of their lives remains unchanged. Why? Because they have never taken up one of the central ways God uses to change us: study. Jesus made it unmistakably clear that the knowledge of the truth will set us free. "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us. Getting "high on Jesus" will not free us. Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free.

This principle is true in every area of human endeavor. It is true in biology and mathematics. It is true in marriages and other human relationships. But it is especially true in reference to the spiritual life. Many are hampered and confused in the spiritual walk by a simple ignorance of the truth. Worse yet, many have been brought into the most cruel bondage by false teaching. "You traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matt. 23:15).

Let us therefore apply ourselves to learning what constitutes the Spiritual Discipline of study, to identify its pitfalls, to practice it with joy, and to experience the liberation it brings.

What Is Study?

Study is a specific kind of experience in which through careful attention to reality the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction. Remember, the mind will always take on an order conforming to the order upon which it concentrates. Perhaps we observe a tree or read a book. We see it, feel it, understand it, draw conclusions from it. And as we do, our thought processes take on an order conforming to the order in the tree or book. When this is done with concentration, perception, and repetition, ingrained habits of thought are formed.

The Old Testament instructs the Israelites to write the Laws on gates and doorposts and bind them to their wrists so that "they shall be as frontlets between your eyes" (Deut. 11:18).

The purpose of this instruction is to direct the mind repeatedly and regularly toward certain modes of thought about God and human relationships. A rosary or a prayer wheel has the same objective. Of course, the New Testament replaces laws written on the doorposts with laws written on the heart and leads us to Jesus, our ever-present and inward Teacher.

We must once again emphasize that the ingrained habits of thought that are formed *will* conform to the order of the thing being studied. *What* we study determines the kind of habits that are formed, which is why Paul urges us to focus on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious.

The process that occurs in study should be distinguished from meditation. Meditation is devotional; study is analytical. Meditation will relish a word; study will explicate it. Although meditation and study often overlap, they constitute two distinct experiences. Study provides a certain objective framework within which meditation can successfully function.

In study there are two "books" to be studied: verbal and nonverbal. Books and lectures, therefore, constitute only half the field of study, perhaps less. The world of nature and, most important, the careful observation of events and actions are the primary nonverbal fields of study.

The principal task of study is a perception into the reality of a given situation, encounter, book, etc. We can go through a major crisis, for example, without any perception of the real nature of the tragic situation. But if we carefully observe and reflect upon what occurred, we can learn a great deal.

Four Steps

Study involves four steps. The first is repetition. Repetition regularly channels the mind in a specific direction, thus ingraining habits of thought. We may smile condescendingly at the old teaching method of recitation, but we must realize that sheer repetition without even understanding what is being repeated does affect the inner mind. Ingrained habits of thought

can be formed by repetition alone, thus changing behavior. This is one reason why so many forms of spirituality emphasize the regular rehearsal of the deeds of God. This is also the central rationale behind psychocybernetics, which trains the individual to repeat certain affirmations regularly (for example, I love myself unconditionally). It is not even important that the person believe what he or she is repeating, only that it be repeated. The inner mind is thus trained and will eventually respond by modifying behavior to conform to the affirmation. This principle has, of course, been known for centuries but only recently has it received scientific confirmation.

This is why the issue of television programming is so important. With innumerable murders being portrayed each evening on prime time TV, the repetition alone trains the inner mind in destructive thought patterns.

Concentration is the second step in study. If, in addition to bringing the mind repeatedly to the subject matter, the person will concentrate on what is being studied, learning is vastly increased. Concentration centers the mind. It focuses the attention on what is being studied. The human mind has an incredible ability to concentrate. It constantly receives thousands of stimuli, each one of which is stored in its memory banks while it focuses on only a few. This natural ability of the brain is enhanced when, with singleness of purpose, we center our attention upon a desired object of study.

We live in a culture that does not value concentration. Distraction is the order of the day. Many will, for example, go through all the activities of the day and evening with the radio on. Some will read a book and watch TV at the same time. Most people find it virtually impossible to go through an entire day focusing on a single thing. We are the lesser for this dissipation of our energies.

When we not only repeatedly focus the mind in a particular direction, centering our attention on the subject, but understand what we are studying, we reach a new level. Comprehension then is the third step in the Discipline of study.

Jesus, as you remember, reminds us that it is not just the truth but the *knowledge* of the truth that sets us free (John 8:32). Comprehension focuses on the knowledge of the truth. All of us have had the experience of reading something over and over and then, all of sudden, we understand what it means. This “eureka” experience of understanding catapults us onto a new level of growth and freedom. It leads to insight and discernment. It provides the basis for a true perception of reality.

One further step is needed: reflection. Although comprehension defines what we are studying, reflection defines the *significance* of what we are studying. To reflect, to ruminate, on the events of our time leads us to the inner reality of those events. Reflection brings us to see things from God’s perspective. In reflection we come to understand not only our subject matter, but ourselves. Jesus speaks often of ears that do not hear and eyes that do not see. When we ponder the meaning of what we study, we come to hear and see in a new way.

It soon becomes obvious that study demands humility. Study simply cannot happen until we are willing to be subject to the subject matter. We must submit to the system. We must come as student, not teacher. Not only is study directly dependent upon humility, but it is conducive to it. Arrogance and a teachable spirit are mutually exclusive.

All of us know persons who have taken some course of study or attained some academic degree who parade their information in an offensive manner. We should feel profound sorrow for such people. They do not understand the Spiritual Discipline of study. They have mistaken the accumulation of information for knowledge. They equate the spouting of words with wisdom. How tragic! The apostle John defines eternal life as the knowledge of God. “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). Even a touch of this experiential knowledge is sufficient to give us a profound sense of humility.

Now, having laid the basis, let us move on to consider the practical implementation of the Discipline of study.

Study of Books

When we consider study, we most naturally think of books or other writings. Though only half of the field, as I stated earlier, books are the most obvious and clearly important.

Unfortunately, many seem to think that studying a book is a simple task. No doubt this flippant attitude accounts for the poor reading habits of so many people. Studying a book is an extremely complex matter, especially for the novice. As with tennis or typing, when we are first learning it seems that there are a thousand details to master and we wonder how on earth we will keep everything in mind at the same time. Once we reach proficiency, however, the mechanics become second nature, and we are able to concentrate on our tennis game or the material to be typed.

The same is true with studying a book. Study is an exacting art involving a labyrinth of details. To convince people that they must *learn* to study is the major obstacle. Most people assume that because they know how to read words they know how to study. This limited grasp of the nature of study explains why so many people gain so little from reading books.

When we read a book, three intrinsic and three extrinsic rules govern our study.^{*} The intrinsic rules may, in the beginning, necessitate three separate readings but in time can be done concurrently. The first reading involves *understanding* the book: what is the author saying? The second reading involves *interpreting* the book: what does the author mean? The third reading involves *evaluating* the book: is the author right or wrong? Most of us tend to do the third reading right away and often never do the first and second readings at all. We give a critical analysis of a book before we understand what it says. We judge a book to be right or wrong before we interpret its meaning. The wise writer of Ecclesiastes says that there is a time for every

^{*}These matters are covered in detail in Mortimer J. Adler’s *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940). I am indebted to him for these insights into the Discipline of study.

matter under heaven, and the time for critical analysis of a book comes *after* careful understanding and interpretation.

The intrinsic rules of study, however, are in themselves inadequate. To read successfully we need the extrinsic aids of *experience, other books, and live discussion.*

Experience is the only way we can interpret and relate to what we read. We read a book on tragedy with different eyes when we have walked through the valley of the shadow ourselves. Experience that has been understood and reflected upon informs and enlightens our study.

Other books can include dictionaries, commentaries, and other interpretative literature, but great books that precede or advance the issue being studied are more significant. Books often have meaning only when they are read in relation to other writings. People will find it exceedingly difficult to understand the New Testament books of Romans or Hebrews, for example, without a grounding in the literature of the Old Testament. It is nearly impossible to read *The Federalist Papers* without first having read the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution. The great writings that take up the central issues of life interact with one another. They cannot be read in isolation.

Live discussion refers to the ordinary interaction that occurs among human beings as they pursue a particular course of study. Often my students and I will read from Plato or St. Augustine and have only a fragmentary grasp of the meaning or significance of what we have read. But when we gather for discussion, debate, and Socratic dialogue insights emerge that would never have come without this exchange. We interact with the author, we interact with each other, and new creative ideas are born.

The first and most important book we are to study is the Bible. The psalmist asks, "How can a young man keep his way pure?" He then answers his own question, "By guarding it according to thy word," and adds, "I have laid up thy word in my heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Ps. 119:9, 11).

Probably the "word" that the psalmist refers to is the Torah, but Christians throughout the centuries have found this to be true in their study throughout Scripture. "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). Note that the central purpose is not doctrinal purity (though that is no doubt involved) but inner transformation. We come to the Scripture to be changed, not to amass information.

We must understand, however, that a vast difference exists between the study of Scripture and the devotional reading of Scripture. In the study of Scripture a high priority is placed upon interpretation: what it means. In the devotional reading of Scripture a high priority is placed upon application: what it means for me. All too often people rush to the application stage and bypass the interpretation stage: they want to know what it means for them before they know what it means! Also, we are not seeking spiritual ecstasy in study; in fact, ecstasy can be a hindrance. When we study a book of the Bible we are seeking to be controlled by the intent of the author. We are determined to hear what he is saying, not what we want him to say. We want life-transforming truth, not just good feelings. We are willing to pay the price of barren day after barren day until the meaning is clear. This process revolutionizes our lives.

The apostle Peter found some things in the epistles of "our beloved brother Paul" that were "hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:15, 16). If Peter found it so, we will as well. We will need to work at it. Daily devotional reading is certainly commendable, but it is not study. Anyone who is after "a little word from God for today" is not interested in the Discipline of study.

The average adult Sunday School class is far too superficial and devotional to help us study the Bible. (There are exceptions and some churches offer serious courses in the Bible.) Perhaps you live close to a seminary or university where you can audit courses. If so, you are fortunate, especially if you find a teacher

who dispenses *life* as well as information. If, however, that is not the case (and even if it is) you can do several things to begin studying the Bible.

Some of my most profitable experiences of study have come through structuring a private retreat of two to three days' duration. No doubt you will object that, given your schedule, you cannot possibly find that kind of time. I want you to know that it is no easier for me to set aside the time than for anyone else. I fight and struggle for every retreat, scheduling it into my datebook many weeks in advance. I have suggested this idea to many groups and found that professional people with busy schedules, laborers with rigid schedules, homemakers with multiple schedules, and others can, in fact, find time for a private study retreat. I have discovered that the most difficult problem is not finding time but convincing myself that this is important enough to set aside the time.

Scripture tells us that following the marvelous resurrection of Dorcas, Peter "tarried many days in Joppa with one Simon a tanner" (Acts 9:43, KJV). It was while tarrying in Joppa that the Holy Spirit got through to Peter (with visual aids no less) about his cultural and ethnic prejudices. What would have happened if, instead of tarrying, Peter had immediately struck out on a speaking tour to tell of the resurrection of Dorcas? Is it possible that he would have failed to come to that shattering insight from the Holy Spirit, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34)? No one knows. But I do know this: God desires various "tarrying" places for all of us where he can teach us in special ways.

For many people, a weekend is a good time for such an experience. Others can arrange a block of time in the middle of the week. If only one day is possible, a Sunday is often excellent.

The best place is almost anywhere, as long as it is away from home. To leave the house or apartment not only sets us free from the telephone and domestic responsibilities, but it also

sets our minds into a learning mode. Motels, as well as cabins, work well. Camping is less desirable since the tasks of living distract us more. Most retreat centers can accommodate private retreatants; Catholic centers in particular have a long tradition of encouraging private retreats and therefore have appropriate facilities.

Organized group retreats almost never take study seriously so you will probably need to structure the retreat yourself. Because you are alone you will need to discipline yourself and use your time carefully. If you are new at it you will not want to overdo and thus burn yourself out. With experience, however, you can put in ten to twelve hours of good study each day.

What should you study? That depends on what you need. I do not know your needs, but I know that one of the great needs among Christians today is simply the reading of large portions of Scripture. Much of our Bible reading is fragmentary and sporadic. I actually have known students who have taken Bible courses and never even read, as a whole, the book being studied. Consider taking a major book of the Bible, like Genesis or Jeremiah, and read it straight through. Notice the structure and flow of the book. Note areas of difficulty and return to them later. Jot down thoughts and impressions. Sometimes it is wise to combine the study of the Bible with the study of some great, devotional classic. Such retreat experiences can transform your life.

Another approach to the study of the Bible is to take a smaller book, like Ephesians or 1 John, and read it through each day for a month. More than any single effort this will put the structure of the book into your mind. Read it without trying to fit it into established categories. Expect to hear new things in new ways. Keep a journal of your findings. In the course of these studies you will obviously want to make use of the best secondary aids available.

In addition to studying the Bible, do not neglect the study of some of the experiential classics in Christian literature. Begin

with *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Next turn to *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. Don't neglect *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. For an added pleasure read *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* by Brother Ugolino. Perhaps you might want something a bit heavier next like the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal. Enjoy the *Table Talks* of Martin Luther before you wade into Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Consider reading the pacemaker of religious journal writing, *The Journal of George Fox*, or perhaps the better-known *Journal of John Wesley*. Read carefully William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*; its words carry a contemporary ring. From the twentieth century read *A Testament of Devotion* by Thomas Kelly, *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis.

Obviously this is only a sampling. I completely passed over the *Revelations of Divine Love* by Juliana of Norwich, *Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales, *The Journal of John Woolman*, and many other books. Nor should we forget the great body of literature by men and women from many walks of life. Many of these thinkers have unusual perception into the human predicament. Writers like Lao-tse of China and Zarathustra of Persia, Shakespeare and Milton, Cervantes and Dante, Tolstoy and Dostoevski, and, in our century, Dag Hammarskjöld.

One word of caution is in order. Do not be overwhelmed or discouraged by all the books you have not read. You will probably not read all those listed here and will undoubtedly read others not noted. These writings have been listed to help you see the excellent amount of literature at our disposal to guide us in the spiritual walk. Many others have traveled the same path and have left markers. Remember that the key to the Discipline of study is not reading many books, but experiencing what we do read.

Study of Nonverbal "Books"

We now come to the least recognized but perhaps the most important field of study: the observation of reality in things, events, and actions. The easiest place to begin is with nature. It is not difficult to see that the created order has many things to teach us.

Isaiah tells us that "...the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (Isa. 55:12). The handiwork of the Creator can speak to us and teach us if we will listen. Martin Buber tells the story of the rabbi who went to a pond every day at dawn to learn "the song with which the frogs praise God."¹

We begin the study of nature by paying attention. We see flowers or birds. We observe them carefully and prayerfully. André Gide describes the time when he observed a moth being reborn from its chrysalis during a classroom lecture. He was filled with wonder, awe, joy at this metamorphosis, this resurrection. Enthusiastically, he showed it to his professor who replied with a note of disapproval, "What! Didn't you know that a chrysalis is the envelope of a butterfly? Every butterfly you see has come out of a chrysalis. It's perfectly natural." Disillusioned, Gide wrote, "Yes, indeed, I knew my *natural* history as well, perhaps better than he.... But because it was natural, could he not see that it was marvelous? Poor creature! From that day, I took a dislike to him and a loathing to his lessons."² Who wouldn't! Gide's professor had only amassed information; he had not studied. And so the first step in the study of nature is reverent observation. A leaf can speak of order and variety, complexity and symmetry. Evelyn Underhill writes, "Gather yourself up, as the exercises of recollection have taught you to do. Then...stretch out by a distinct act of loving will towards one of the myriad manifestations of life that surround you.... As to the object of contemplation, it matters little. From Alp to insect, anything will do, provided that your attitude be right."³

The next step is to make friends with the flowers and the trees and the little creatures that creep upon the earth. Like the fabled Dr. Doolittle, talk with the animals. Of course, you can't really talk to each other...or can you? There is certainly a communication that goes beyond words, and often animals seem to respond to our friendship and compassion. I know this because I have experimented with it and so have some first-rate scientists, and we have found it to be true. Perhaps the stories of St. Francis taming the wolf of Gubbio and preaching to the birds are not so farfetched. Of this much we can be sure: if we love the creation, we will learn from it. In *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevski counsels, "Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day."⁴

There are, of course, many other "books" beside nature that we should study. If we will observe the relationships that go on between human beings, we will receive a graduate-level education. Watch, for example, how much of our speech is aimed at justifying our actions. We find it almost impossible to act and allow the act to speak for itself. No, we must explain it, justify it, demonstrate the rightness of it. Why do we feel this compulsion to set the record straight? Because of pride and fear, because our reputations are at stake!

This compulsion is particularly easy to observe among salespeople, writers, ministers, professors—all those who earn their living by being good with words. If, however, we gradually make ourselves one of the principal subjects of study we will be delivered from a haughty spirit. In time we will be unable to pray like the Pharisee, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men ..." (Luke 18:11).

We should become attentive to the ordinary relationships we encounter throughout the day: at home, work, school. We no-

tice the things that control people. Remember, we are not trying to condemn or judge anyone; we are only trying to learn. If we do find a judging spirit emerging within ourselves, we observe that and learn.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the principal objects of our study should be ourselves. We should learn the things that control *us*. We observe our inner feelings and mood swings. What controls our moods? Why do we like certain people and dislike others? What do these things teach us about ourselves?

In doing all this we are not trying to be amateur psychologists or sociologists. Nor are we obsessed with excessive introspection. We study these matters with a spirit of humility, needing a large dose of grace. We want only to follow the dictum of Socrates: "Know thyself." And through the blessed Holy Spirit we are expecting Jesus to be our living and ever-present Teacher.

We would do well to study institutions and cultures and the forces that shape them. Also, we should ponder the events of our time, noting first, with a spirit of discernment, what things our culture lifts up as "great events." Let's look at the values of the culture—not what people say they are, but what they actually are.

Let's learn to ask questions. What are the assets and liabilities of a technological society? What has the fast-food industry done to the tradition of a family gathering for dinner? Why do we find it difficult in our culture to have time to develop relationships? Is Western individualism beneficial or destructive? What in our culture is in harmony with the gospel and what is at odds with it? One of the most important functions of Christian

⁴*This counsel is for reasonably mature and well-adjusted individuals. It is not for mental depressives or others who are bowed low by the burdens of life. For them these exercises are too depressing and self-defeating. If you find your days too heavy for this kind of study, please do not attempt it. But there is hope and there is something you can do. See the chapters on confession and guidance.*

prophets in our day is the ability to perceive the consequences of various forces in our culture and to make value judgments upon them.

Study produces joy. Like any novice, we will find it hard work in the beginning. But the greater our proficiency, the greater our joy, Alexander Pope says, "There is no study that is not capable of delighting us after a little application to it."⁵ Study is well worth our most serious effort.

II.

THE OUTWARD DISCIPLINES