

The Discipline Of Suffering By Dave Butts

~Other Speakers S-Z: Classic Christian Writings:

For many years, Christians have worked on the spiritual disciplines in their lives. Discipline can be a very negative word for many people. It can speak of punishment for doing wrong. But the main focus of discipline is learning or training. We train ourselves to accomplish a particular task or ability. Discipline is that training process.

The particular discipline you work on depends upon your goal. If you want to become an Olympic diving champion, you will set for yourself the discipline of practicing your dives many times, every day, for a very long period. It's not necessarily fun, but you do it to achieve a goal.

The ultimate goal for the follower of Christ is to become Christlike. Paul said it this way in Colossians 1:28, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ." A desire for intimacy with Christ is the foundation for everything else in the Christian life. Therefore, the disciplines we put into our lives are intended to help us achieve this goal.

Fasting, solitude, silence, meditation, and prayer are a few of the better known spiritual disciplines that help us move more into a life of intimacy with Christ. There are other disciplines that are sometimes less popular. Perhaps the least popular is the discipline of suffering.

Who would choose the discipline of suffering? Well... Jesus for one. He chose suffering because of His great love for us. Willing to endure suffering for a redemptive purpose, He chose the Cross. We must move in the direction of the Cross if we are to be intimate with Jesus. Peter said it this way: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

The discipline of suffering is not for those who perversely enjoy pain. It is instead, the response of the Christians to existing suffering, both in their own lives and in the lives of others. It is embracing suffering and then using it to help transform us into Christ-likeness. In his classic book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard Foster calls this discipline the Prayer of Suffering. He writes, "In the Prayer of Suffering we leave far behind our needs and wants, even our transformation and union with God. Here we give to God the various difficulties and trials that we face, asking him to use them redemptively. We also voluntarily take into ourselves the griefs and sorrows of others in order to set them free."

For Foster, the discipline of suffering happens both when we experience suffering or trials in our own life, as well as when we walk with others through their difficulties. Both have the power to transform us, helping us achieve our goal of becoming more like Christ.

We sometimes have nice sounding phrases or platitudes for those going through difficulties. "Into everyone's life a little rain must fall." Or, "You've got to learn to take the good with the bad." To be honest, it's going to take more than a quaint saying to help us deal with the tough blows of life. The Christian life is not one of merely enduring suffering, but triumphing through suffering. William Penn's words are true: "No Cross, No Crown."

The discipline of suffering is an attitude developed by those who are committed to following Jesus even to the extent of desiring "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings"(Col.3:10). We grow in this as we agree with the Apostle Paul that we will be thankful in(the midst of) all things. It is a mindset radically different from a society that seeks to remove itself as far as possible from any kind of discomfort or pain.

There is another aspect to this discipline. Foster called it, "voluntarily taking into ourselves the griefs and sorrows of others in order to set them free." This is true intercessory prayer. It is groaning with and for others who are hurting. It is not inserting a brief mention of the suffering of someone else into your prayer list. Instead, the intercessor lingers over the situation, asking God to allow them to understand; yes, even experience the hurt of the other so that true prayer may be released on the hurting one's behalf.

You've perhaps already experienced this in your life. You've gone to a friend to comfort or console them in the midst of their pain and instead of words you found yourself in tears. Oh, you didn't think it was prayer, but God heard your tears...perhaps much more than your words. You identified with your friend's hurt and you became in that moment, one whom God could use to bring healing.

I refer again to Richard Foster to bring balance to this teaching: "We need not continue shouldering the

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burdens of others, but rather we release them into the arms of the Father. Without this releasing the burdens will become too much for us, and depression will set in. Besides, it is not necessary. Our task in reality is a small one: to hold the agony of others just long enough for them to let go of it for themselves. Then together we can give all things over to God."

We find ourselves in a hurting world. From the small frustrations of everyday life to major tragedies, we all experience varying degrees of pain and suffering. The question is: How will we handle these difficulties? Those who follow Jesus will follow Him to the Cross. Suffering becomes a part of the Christian life that allows us to draw even nearer to our Lord. This triumphant lifestyle in the midst of this world's suffering allows us to draw near to those who are hurting and bring them in prayer to the Savior's healing hand. Jesus tells us very clearly, "In this world you will have trouble..." But He doesn't leave it there. He continues on to say, "Take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).