When I was in High School I played the tuba in marching band. We never did all that well in competitions, but we had a lot of fun doing it. We also had to practice a lot. We had about 40 people in our band and we had to coordinate everything that was going on. We all had to be in the right place at the right time to make the forms we wanted the audience to see. We had to coordinate our steps so we moved together and didn’t run each other over. On top of all of that we had to know our songs so well that we could play it without the music in front of us.

All of that meant lots and lots of practice. We had two weeks of band camp during the summer when we would learn all our drills and start learning the music. Then we would practice every day in band and 3 hours after school almost every day. Do you ever get something so deeply woven into your head that you dream about it in detail almost every night? That’s what happened with marching band. I knew our shows so well that I would dream about exactly which notes to play, exactly where I was supposed to stand. And my nightmares were about ruining the entire show by doing something stupid.

We practice things like that in detail over and over again until we get it right. We want to make sure that we stay sharp and we do the best that we can. My question for you is do we do the same thing with our faith? Do we practice our faith with the same rigor and devotion that we practice something like playing music or playing a sport? The reality is that we ought to be even *more* committed to practicing something as important as our faith than we are anything else.

Rod and I are going to talk for the next several weeks about the spiritual disciplines. That may be a new term to you, or maybe not. Some of the disciplines that we talk about over the next several weeks might be new to you as well. Maybe you have never thought about doing some of the things that we’ll mention, and that’s okay. Our goal in talking about these disciplines is to give you some tools to help you grow in your relationship with Jesus.

This year we’ve been focusing on discipleship. We’ve talked a lot about what it means to follow Jesus as his disciple. But we don’t want you to just have the knowledge of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We don’t just want you to know about Jesus. We want to know Jesus himself and learn how to follow him well. We want to give you tools you can use to put your faith into practice.

That’s what the spiritual disciplines are. The spiritual disciplines are things that we can practice and do that will help us become more like Jesus. These disciplines help us allow the Holy Spirit to do the work of cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. They help us to get closer to Jesus so that he can change our lives.

So why are these things so important? Before we talk about what these disciplines are, lets talk about what they are not.

1. The spiritual disciplines are not what save us.

Just because you read the Bible or pray a lot doesn’t mean your heart is right with God. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We can’t earn salvation. These disciplines simply help us cultivate a closer relationship with Jesus.

1. The spiritual disciplines are not what change us.

They only place us before God so that he can do the changing, so he can transform us and change our hearts. We are incapable of changing our hearts on our own. Only God can do that. But when we think we are capable of changing ourselves, we are in danger of allowing ourselves to sink even further into our sin. Henri Arnold said, ‘As long as we think we can save ourselves by our own will power, we will only make the evil in us stronger than ever.’

The only way for us to be changed is to allow God to do his work in our lives. But here’s the danger: we can take that thought too far and say, ‘Oh well, it’s up to God, there’s nothing I can do myself’.

We may not be able to do the changing ourselves, but there is plenty we can do to let the Holy Spirit into our lives to do his changing work. The spiritual disciplines are, very simply, the things that we can do to place ourselves before God so we can be changed by him.

In Galatians 6.8, Paul compares this to the work of a farmer. A farmer can cultivate the ground and prepare it, he can do things to help along the growth of the plants, and he can sow the seeds in the soil. But in the end, there is nothing a farmer can do to actually make the plants grow.

You can look at the spiritual disciplines as preparing the soil of your heart, planting seeds of righteousness. But they will not make you grow or change on their own. That is the work of God in your life as a result of your preparation. The spiritual disciplines are the tools we can use to prepare ourselves for God to work in our lives.

Today we are going to talk about two of these spiritual disciplines, Prayer and Meditation. We’re going to look at them together because in many ways they are very closely connected.

Now there is far more to be said about both of these disciplines than could ever be said in one sermon. So I want you to know that neither this sermon, nor any of the other sermons we do in the coming weeks will be an exhaustive treatment of the disciplines we talk about. There is far more to be said about these disciplines than we can talk about in one sitting.

Our goal in this is to introduce you to these disciplines. We want to get you started down the path of practicing these things so that you can go explore them and practice them on your own. It’s all well and good to hear us teach about these things, but the spiritual disciplines can only be fully learned by putting them into practice. Our ultimate goal is to give you the tools to do that.

The first discipline I want to deal with is one you all know pretty well. Richard Foster says that “Of all the Spiritual Disciplines, prayer is the most central, because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father.”

Prayer can be difficult. Prayer can be scary. Most of all because to pray means to change. Our prayers bring us before God, and that means that we will change. If you show me someone who is unwilling to change, I can show you someone who is not a person of prayer. Praying means that we come in front of God and ask his guidance, his wisdom, and his help. Someone who is not willing to change will not do that. They will abandon prayer.

There are a few people throughout the history of the church that absolutely excelled at prayer.

Martin Luther is one of those. Most of us say, “I’m so busy today I don’t have time to spend time with God, I’ll do it another day.” But Martin Luther said once, “I have so much to do today that I’m going to need to spend three hours in prayer in order to be able to get it all done.”. That was instead of his normal two hours of prayer a day.

John Wesley was convinced that God would not move except in response to prayer. Some people are all talk when they say things like that, but John Wesley devoted two hours each day to prayer. A man named Adorniram Judson was a missionary to Burma, what is now Myanmar, in the 1800’s. He took time out of his day every three hours, seven times a day to go off by himself and pray.

Those are pretty impressive people who did some pretty amazing things, but they saw prayer as the cornerstone of not just their faith, but their entire life. We obviously see a lot of biblical examples of prayer as well.

In Daniel 9, King Darius made a decree that anyone who prayed to anyone or anything other than himself would be killed. That didn’t stop Daniel though. Even the threat of death was not enough to make him to give up his prayer time**. Daniel 6:10 ESV — 10** When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.

In Acts 6 when there was a dispute about how a certain ministry should be handled, this is what the disciples had to say: **Acts 6:3–4 ESV — 3** Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. **4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

The disciples knew how to prioritize. They knew how to delegate tasks to other people so that they could focus on what was really important in their leadership of the early church: continual prayer and the ministry of the word.

Our greatest example is in Jesus himself**. Mark 1:35 ESV — 35** And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

Jesus took time away from his followers, away from his friends and family, away from all the people who needed something from him, and gave the Father the first time of his day. He went to a place where he could be alone with the Father and talk. As you look at times when Jesus took time away to pray like this, you begin to realize that Jesus didn’t just spend a few minutes in prayer and call it good. Jesus took time out of his busy schedule and went away to spend large amounts of time with the Father in prayer. If Jesus needed that kind of time with God, what makes us think that a few minutes a day is sufficient?

The idea that Mark gives us about Jesus’ prayer life is that he was continually taking that time away to pray. Prayer for Jesus it was a constant conversation with God. That exactly what Paul tell us to do in I Thessalonians 5.17 to pray without ceasing. The kind of prayer God wants us to engage in is a constant, two way conversation between us and our Creator.

This is where we connect with the discipline of meditation. Meditation is a discipline that allows us to take a step back from our world that is on the go all the time. Richard Foster says that our adversary, meaning Satan, majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If we are always busy, always wrapped up in the minutiae of our lives, we will miss the intimacy with God that the disciplines are meant to help us get at.

Meditation has become a lot more popular in recent years in the secular world. But most of the time when you hear people talking about meditation, they are thinking of Eastern meditation. We think of the stereotypical sitting cross-legged on the floor with your palms up humming. It doesn’t always look like that, but the goal is the same.

The goal of Eastern meditation is to empty the mind. To escape from the world. To become detached from the physical world so that Nirvana can be reached. When our culture thinks of meditation, that’s what they’re aiming at. The goal of Eastern meditation is pretty much the opposite of Christian meditation.

Our goal in Christian meditation is not emptying your mind. There is a certain amount of detachment, but it can’t end there. The goal of Christian meditation is not just detachment, it is detachment from the things that distract us from God. That might be jobs, our bills, maybe that we don’t know what we’re going to fix for dinner that night. Everyday, mundane things tend to capture our thoughts and get us sidetracked when we’re trying to focus on God.

The goal is to press pause for a while. To free ourselves of the things that distract us from him so that we can freely give ourselves to him. The goal of meditation is to make ourselves totally available and distraction free so that we can build that intimate relationship with God. We don’t empty our minds in Christian meditation. We fill our minds and our hearts up with Scripture and focus on listening to God. This is where the two way conversation part of prayer comes in.

Meditation is one of those disciplines that brings us into what Thomas a Kempis calls ‘a familiar friendship with Jesus’. This is where we get to know Jesus, not just give him a list of things we need. Jesus desires the same kind intimacy with us that we would have with a close friend.

**Revelation 3:20 ESV — 20** Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

If you look at the context of that passage, it wasn’t written for unbelievers as an invitation to put their faith in Jesus. It was written as an invitation to an intimate relationship with Jesus for those who already believe. It was an invitation for us to get rid of the distractions and focus on Jesus. To stop and spend time with him.

The most simple and straightforward definition of meditation is practicing the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word. There are no mantras, no hidden mysteries, no higher plane that we’re trying to get to.

Prayer and meditation boil down to the fact that the God who created us wants to have fellowship with us, just like Adam and Eve did in the garden of Eden before the fall. They talked with God, they had a relationship with him. They were in communion with God, not only talking to him and telling him what they needed, but also listening to what God had to say.

That is the very core of meditation: making ourselves available to God and listening, so that we can hear God speaking. We see examples of this kind of meditation throughout the Bible.

**Exodus 33:11 ESV — 11** Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend...

We see Jesus listening intently to what the Father says and obeying him **. John 5:30 ESV — 30** “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

**John 14:10 ESV — 10** Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

Meditation comes up a lot in the Psalms**. Psalm 1:1–2 ESV — 1** Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; **2** but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

**Psalm 119:97 ESV — 97** Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.

There are many more examples of meditation throughout the Bible of people who opened themselves up to hearing God’s voice, who meditated on Scripture and God’s law, and who obeyed what he said. So we’re in good company when we practice this.

You will find as you start to practice the spiritual disciplines that you will face certain obstacles or misconceptions. Perhaps the first obstacle we face is even having the desire to pursue the disciplines in the first place. Maybe they seem too mystical, too strange, too far out of the realm of normal experience.

Before the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution that began in the 17th century, nearly everyone took it for granted that God existed and the spiritual disciplines were just a part of life. That’s part of why the Bible doesn't give a lot of detailed instructions on the disciplines. It just talks about those who practiced them. Because it wasn’t some weird thing that you went to church to learn about, it was a part of everyday life for almost everyone.

But our world is a very different place today. For most of us, even if we were brought up in church, we put immense value on the tangible, scientifically provable world, and we are suspect of things like spirituality that are not as tangible. We want everything to be provable, mathematical.

So maybe you’re okay with coming to church, singing songs, and learning about the Bible, but these things just seem a little too spiritual for you. If that’s where you’re at, God will meet you where you are and work on growing you from there.

Another obstacle or misconception we face is that sometimes we think the disciplines are only for super pious people. We have all seen people who seem to be so far ahead of us spiritually. We wonder how they got there, how they can do it. Because the spiritual disciplines are just hard for most of us. Why do they seem so easy for others, but not for us?.

People Martin Luther or John Calvin seem like spiritual giants. Maybe you even know someone personally who seems like they just excel at the disciplines. It seems to come easy to them. These are people who see Jesus as the defining reality of their lives. People like that should be encouraging to us, but often times they are discouraging instead. Because we feel like we can never measure up, we can never be like that, we can never be that good at being a follower of Jesus.

The good news is that the spiritual disciplines are not just for the super pious or super Christians, they are for all of us. All those people we hear stories about who seem to be so good at these disciplines, they started out exactly where you are right now.

This also isn’t about being better at the disciplines than anyone else. The only function of the spiritual disciplines is to place us before God and bring us closer to him. You can still practice the disciplines in your life if you don’t pray like Martin Luther or John Calvin, because practicing these disciplines at all brings us before God and allows us to be changed.

We also might avoid practicing the spiritual disciplines because they are hard or difficult to implement in our lives or because practicing them means changing our lives and we don’t like change. And those things are true. The neat thing about it is the change that occurs in our lives as a result of practicing the disciplines will only make us want to get even closer to God.

I have never met anyone who was truly experiencing the presence of God in their life and suddenly decided ‘Okay, that’s enough, I think I’m close enough to God now, I can stop’. Getting a small taste of God only makes us thirst for a larger and deeper taste of what it’s like to be in that close relationship with him.

Another obstacle might be the belief that you can’t do it the right way. The spiritual disciplines are not for hyper spiritual people or ascetic monks who devote all their time to prayer and meditation. They are for ordinary people who exercise the disciplines in the midst of their real lives. People who have jobs, people who have children and grandchildren to care for, people who have to do everyday mundane tasks like washing dishes or mowing grass.

Foster says in the forward of his book *Celebration of Discipline*, “Beginners are welcome. I, too, am a beginner, even and especially after a number of years of practicing every discipline discussed in this book.” Thomas Merton, who wrote quite about the spiritual disciplines, says, “We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!.”

Don’t compare yourself to how you think someone else is doing with the spiritual disciplines. Be faithful to spend time with God and he will meet you exactly where you are and slowly move you deeper in relationship with him.

Often times people struggle to get started with the disciplines. They just don’t know where to start. So I’d like to give you some very practical ideas of how you can implement these disciplines in your life.

I have had a lot of people tell me they just don’t know how to pray. You know what my response to them is? God wants a relationship with you, so speak with God like you do to other people you have a relationship with. Imagine your best friend was sitting right next to you. What would you talk about? What would you say? What things throughout your day frustrate you or give you joy? Those are the things God wants to hear from you. This isn’t about some proper liturgy or scripted prayer. Just talk to God. He wants to hear from you.

My second suggestion is that you keep a prayer journal. That was suggested to me early in high school and I’ve kept one ever since. For me it does two things. It keeps me from getting distracted while I pray. It gives me a record of my prayers so I can go back and look at all the prayers God has answered. That has ended up being a huge blessing in my life.

If you are having trouble with prayer, experiment with prayer a little, it’s okay, I promise. Find a posture that works for you: standing, kneeling, sitting, face down on the floor. Try different kinds of prayer. Prayer is between you and God, not you and anyone else.

Another thing you can do is pray through Scripture. Use Scripture to guide your prayer. The Psalms work really well for this one. I’ll admit it felt a little fake to me the first several times I did it. But find a Psalm that connects with how you are currently feeling and make it yours. You can say it differently, write it down differently. As fake and scripted as it felt at first, now this is one of my favorite ways to pray.

My final suggestion is don’t end your prayer just because you said Amen. You don’t have that kind of formality with your friends when you speak to them, and you don’t have to with God either. If your friend was there, you would just speak, have a conversation throughout the day. That’s what God wants from us as well.

Meditation might be a little harder for us to pin down. Most of us have at least attempted prayer before. Chances are pretty good that many of us have never even thought about meditation, much less practiced it.

My first suggestion is to find a quiet, distraction free place where you can be alone with God. Jesus went to a mountain to be alone with God. You need to find your own mountain and go be alone there with God and open yourself up to hear his voice.

One thing that can be tricky if you’ve never done it before is to meditate on Scripture. The OT mentions meditation 58 different times. The Bible talks about listening to God’s word, reflecting on things God has done, and what can best be described as ruminating on God’s law.

That’s a really apt example of what meditation is all about. Cattle are part of a group of animals that regurgitate their food and continue to chew and digest it. They will sit and chew on the same food over and over again until they have sucked every possible nutrient out of the food.

That’s the idea behind meditating on Scripture. So often we are so concerned with how much Scripture we are reading that we lose the quality of our understanding and internalization of that Scripture. So meditate on small portions of Scripture at a time.

There are a bunch of websites and several cell phone apps that are dedicated to Bible reading plans. You can pick out whichever Bible reading plan suits you, whichever version of the Bible suits you. A lot of people, myself included, end up using one of the year long Bible reading plans. They even have plans that will get you through the entire Bible in 3 months. You ended up reading something like 12 chapters a day. Now there is absolutely nothing wrong with reading the Bible in a year, or even reading more than that. There is a serious lack of biblical literacy in our culture and in our churches today, and the only cure for that is to read and study the Bible more.

But if you are reading multiple chapters per day, it can be really hard to internalize that Scripture, to hide it in your heart. We end up reading the Bible as if it’s just a history book or a novel of some kind. Just read through and you’re done.

Meditating on Scripture kind of takes the opposite approach. You read very little quantity wise, but you dwell on that Scripture throughout the day, maybe even longer. Friedrich Bonheoffer suggested spending an entire week on a single text. In that amount of time, people on a year long Bible reading plan will have read somewhere around 30 chapters, but how much have they retained, how much of God’s voice have they really heard spoken through the words of Scripture when they are hurriedly reading through their several chapters a day so they can check it off their list?

Meditating on Scripture is all about listening to what God is telling you through his word and obeying what he says. Often times instruction comes on simple, mundane, everyday things through meditation, like what you should prioritize that day, how to handle a certain situation in your life. Our job is simply to listen to God. If we will do that, God will speak through his word.

Obviously there’s a lot more to be said about prayer and meditation and how to practice them. I think we could probably do an entire sermon series on each one of these and not cover everything that could be said about it. Our goal in talking about these things is not necessarily to fully educate you about the disciplines, but to give you the tools you need to start practicing them well.

Both of these disciplines, prayer and meditation, are about getting closer to God, putting yourself before him so that he can begin to change you. The key to the spiritual disciplines is realizing that the whole point is pursuing a relationship with God. They are about getting into genuine conversation with the God that so desperately wants to have a deep and intimate relationship with you. Draw near to him, and he will draw near to you.