

THE SPIRIT OF THE DISCIPLINES

Understanding
How God Changes Lives

DALLAS WILLARD

Table of Contents

Foreword	v
Preface	vii
1. The Secret of the Easy Yoke	1
2. Making Theology of the Disciplines Practical	11
3. Salvation Is a Life	28
4. “Little Less Than a God”	44
5. The Nature of Life	56
6. Spiritual Life: The Body’s Fulfillment	75
7. St. Paul’s Psychology of Redemption—The Example	95
8. History and the Meaning of the Disciplines	130
9. Some Main Disciplines for the Spiritual Life	156
10. Is Poverty Spiritual?	193
11. The Disciplines and the Power Structures of This World	220
Epilogue	251
Appendix I. Jeremy Taylor’s Counsel on the Application of Rules for Holy Living	255
Appendix II. Discipleship: For Super-Christians Only?	258
Bibliography	266
Name Index	271
Subject Index	276

Scripture Index

279

About the Author

Praise

Other Books by Dallas Willard

Cover

Copyright

About the Publisher

Preface

The modern age is an age of revolution—revolution motivated by insight into the appalling vastness of human suffering and need. Pleas for holiness and attacks on sin and Satan were used for centuries as the guide and the cure for the human situation. Today such pleas have been replaced with a new agenda. On the communal level, political and social critiques yield recipes for revolutions meant to liberate humankind from its many bondages. And on the individual level various self-fulfillment techniques promise personal revolutions bringing “freedom in an unfree world” and passage into the good life. Such are modern answers to humanity’s woes.

Against this background a few voices have continued to emphasize that the cause of the distressed human condition, individual and social—and its only possible cure—is a *spiritual* one. But what these voices are saying is not clear. They point out that social and political revolutions have shown no tendency to transform the heart of darkness that lies deep in the breast of every human being. That is evidently true. And amid a flood of techniques for self-fulfillment there is an epidemic of depression, suicide, personal emptiness, and escapism through drugs and alcohol, cultic obsession, consumerism, and sex and violence—all combined with an inability to sustain deep and enduring personal relationships.

So obviously the problem *is* a spiritual one. And so must be the cure.

But if the cure is spiritual, how does modern Christianity fit into the answer? Very poorly, it seems, for Christians are among those caught up in the sorrowful epidemic just referred to. And that fact is so prominent that modern thinking has come to view the Christian faith as powerless, even somehow archaic, at the very least irrelevant.

Yet even though the church's track record for solving social and individual ills may not appear historically outstanding, we believe that it holds the *only* answer—still. What then is keeping Christianity from being that guide to life which it alone can be? Christianity can only succeed as a guide for current humanity if it does two things.

First, it must take the need for human transformation as seriously as do modern revolutionary movements. The modern negative critique of Christianity arose in the first place because the church was not faithful to its own message—it failed to take human transformation seriously as a real, practical issue to be dealt with in realistic terms. Fortunately, there are today many signs that the church in all its divisions is preparing to correct this failure.

Second, it needs to clarify and exemplify realistic methods of human transformation. It must show how the ordinary individuals who make up the human race today can become, through the grace of Christ, a love-filled, effective, and powerful community.

This book offers help with this second task. Here I want to deal with methods for the spiritual life, for the life present in the Christian gospel. We *can* become like Christ in character and in power and thus realize our highest ideals of well-being and well-doing. That is the heart of the New Testament message.

Do you believe this is possible?

My central claim is that we *can* become like Christ by doing one thing—by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live. We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father.

What activities did Jesus practice? Such things as solitude and silence, prayer, simple and sacrificial living, intense study and meditation upon God's Word and God's ways, and service to others. Some of these will certainly be even more necessary to us than they were to him, because of our greater or different need. But in a balanced life of such activities, we will be constantly enlivened

by “The Kingdom Not of This World”—the Kingdom of Truth as seen in John 18:36–37.

But history keeps a heavy hand upon our present thoughts and feelings. Such a faith as just described is strongly opposed today by powerful tendencies around us. Faith today is treated as something that only *should* make us different, not that actually *does* or *can* make us different. In reality we *vainly* struggle against the evils of this world, waiting to die and go to heaven. Somehow we’ve gotten the idea that the essence of faith is entirely a mental and inward thing.

I don’t think anyone wanted or planned this state of affairs. We have simply let our thinking fall into the grip of a false opposition of grace to “works” that was caused by a mistaken association of works with “merit.” And history has only made things worse. It has built a wall between faith and grace, and what we actually *do*. Of course we know there *must* be some connection between grace and life, but we can’t seem to make it intelligible to ourselves. So, worst of all, we’re unable to use that connection as the basis for specific guidance as to how to enter into Christ’s character and power.

Today, we think of Christ’s power entering our lives in various ways—through the sense of forgiveness and love for God or through the awareness of truth, through special experiences or the infusion of the Spirit, through the presence of Christ in the inner life or through the power of ritual and liturgy or the preaching of the Word, through the communion of the saints or through a heightened consciousness of the depths and mystery of life. All of these are doubtlessly real and of some good effect. However, neither individually nor collectively do any of these ways reliably produce large numbers of people who really are like Christ and his closest followers throughout history. That is statistically verifiable *fact*.

I believe our present difficulty is one of misunderstanding how our experiences and actions enable us to receive the grace of God. There is a deep longing among Christians and non-Christians alike for the personal purity and power to live as our hearts tell us we

should. What we need is a deeper insight into our practical relationship with God in redemption. We need an understanding that can guide us into constant interaction with the Kingdom of God as a real part of our daily lives, an *ongoing spiritual presence* that is at the same time a *psychological reality*. In other words, we must develop a psychologically sound theology of the spiritual life and of its disciplines to guide us.

In the pages that follow, I have tried to deal with the most basic points about our relationship to God. I have first tried to clarify the nature of spiritual life itself, to show how it is the fulfillment of the human body and how our body is a primary *resource* for the spiritual life. Then I offer a perspective on the idea of “spiritual discipline,” and why the disciplines became for all practical purposes lost to us in Western Christianity. Next, I explain the major groups of disciplines relevant to us today, and then conclude by emphasizing how a widespread transformation of character through wisely disciplined discipleship to Christ can transform our world—how it can disarm the structural evils that have always dominated humankind and now threaten to destroy the earth.

So while I write to teach, to add to our knowledge, my ultimate aim is to change our *practice* radically. This book is a plea for the Christian community to place the disciplines for the spiritual life at the heart of the gospel. When we call men and women to life in Christ Jesus, we are offering them the greatest opportunity of their lives—the opportunity of a vivid companionship with him, in which they will learn to be like him and live as he lived. This is that “transforming friendship” explained by Leslie Weatherhead. We *meet* and *dwell* with Jesus and his Father in the disciplines for the spiritual life.

As our meeting place, the disciplines are part of the good news of new life. We should practice them and then invite others to join us there.

I want us to take the disciplines that seriously. I want to inspire Christianity today to remove the disciplines from the category of historical curiosities and place them at the center of the new life in Christ. Only when we do, can Christ’s community take its stand

at the present point of history. Our local assemblies must become academies of life as it was meant to be. From such places there can go forth a people equipped in character and power to judge or guide the earth.

Multitudes are now turning to Christ in all parts of the world. How unbearably tragic it would be, though, if the millions of Asia, South America and Africa were led to believe that the best we can hope for from The Way of Christ is the level of Christianity visible in Europe and America today, a level that has left us tottering on the edge of world destruction. The world can no longer be left to mere diplomats, politicians, and business leaders. They have done the best they could, no doubt. But this is an age for spiritual heroes—a time for men and women to be heroic in faith and in spiritual character and power. The greatest danger to the Christian church today is that of pitching its message *too low*.

Holiness and devotion must now come forth from the closet and the chapel to possess the street and the factory, the schoolroom and boardroom, the scientific laboratory and the governmental office. Instead of a select few making religion their life, with the power and inspiration realized through the spiritual disciplines, all of us can make our daily lives and vocations be “the house of God and the gate of heaven.” It can—and must—happen. And it will happen. The living Christ will make it happen through us as we dwell with him in life appropriately disciplined in the spiritual Kingdom of God.

The Spirit of the Disciplines is nothing but the love of Jesus, with its resolute will to be like him whom we love. In the fellowship of the burning heart, “exercise unto godliness” is our way of receiving ever more fully the grace in which we stand, rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2). The chapters that follow are written to aid you in understanding the absolute necessity of the spiritual disciplines for our faith, and the revolutionary results of practicing these disciplines intelligently and enthusiastically through a full, grace-filled, Christlike life.

1. The Secret of the Easy Yoke

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

MATTHEW 11:29–30

His commands are not burdensome.

1 JOHN 5:3, NIV

A more reasonable estimate of human costs and values will lead us to think that no labour is better expended than that which explores the way to the treasure-houses of the spirit, and shows mankind where to find those goods which are increased by being shared, and which none can take from us.

WILLIAM RALPH INGE

“Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried.” So said that insightful and clever Christian, G. K. Chesterton. Whether or not he was totally serious, there is almost universal belief in the immense difficulty of being a *real* Christian. The vast, grim “cost of discipleship” is something we hear constantly emphasized. Chesterton’s observation can at least be taken as reflecting the attitude of many serious people toward The Way of Christ.

But it must not be left to stand as the whole truth. We would do far better to lay a clear, constant emphasis upon the cost of *non*-discipleship as well. As Søren Kierkegaard reminds us, “It costs a man just as much or even more to go to hell than to come to heaven. Narrow, exceedingly narrow is the way to perdition!”¹

Proverbs 13:15 tells us that it is the way of the transgressor that is hard. We can also learn this by candid observation of life. Actually, a large part of the Old Testament book of Proverbs merely records the results of such observation. The whole book is a song

of praise for the path of the righteous over that of the wicked, leaving no doubt in which life, joy and strength are to be found.

To depart from righteousness is to choose a life of crushing burdens, failures, and disappointments, a life caught in the toils of endless problems that are never resolved. Here is the source of that unending soap opera, that sometimes horror show known as normal human life. The “cost of discipleship,” though it may take all we have, is small when compared to the lot of those who don’t accept Christ’s invitation to be a part of his company in The Way of life.

The words of Jesus quoted above from Matthew 11:29–30 present an alternative to the desolation of life lived apart from God. Yet, in all honesty, most Christians probably find both Jesus’ statement and its reiteration by the author of 1 John (5:3) to be more an expression of a hope or even a mere *wish* than a statement about the substance of their lives. To many, Jesus’ words are frankly bewildering. We hear them often quoted, because the idea they express is obviously one that attracts and delights, but there seems to be something about the way we approach them, something about what we think it means to walk with Christ and obey him, that prevents most of us from entering into the reality which they express. The ease, lightness, and power of his Way we rarely enjoy, much less see, as the pervasive and enduring quality of our street-level human existence.

So we do not have the strength we should have, and Jesus’ commandments become overwhelmingly burdensome to us. In fact, many Christians cannot even believe he actually intended for us to carry them out. So what is the result? His teachings are treated as a mere ideal, one that we may better ourselves by aiming for but know we are bound to fall glaringly short of.

It’s a familiar story. “We’re only human,” we say, and “to err is human.” Such pronouncements may be for another age or “dispensation,” we may think—or possibly they’re for when we are in heaven. But they cannot be for us now. Not really. Jesus could not have imposed anything that *hard* upon us. And beside, we’re in a

period of grace—we are saved by grace, not by anything we do—so obedience to Christ is actually not necessary. And it is so hard, anyway; it cannot be expected of us, much less enjoyed by us.

And so we reason. All of our reasonings cannot, however, remove the thought that Jesus calls us to follow him—to follow him now, not after death.

No one denies that we would be far better off and our world an immeasurably better place, if we were to conform in deed and spirit to who he is and what he taught. And all of our lack of understanding doesn't cancel his offer of an easy yoke and a light burden, in which our souls can find rest. That offer, like his call to follow him, is clearly made to us here and now, in the midst of this life where we labor and bear impossible burdens and cry out for rest. It's true. It's real. We have only to grasp the secret of entering into that easy yoke.

What then is the secret? There is a simple answer to this all-important question. It is one that can be introduced and even made completely clear, by comparing some facts with which we are all familiar

Think of certain young people who idolize an outstanding baseball player. They want nothing so much as to pitch or run or hit as well as their idol. So what do they do? *When they are playing in a baseball game*, they all try to behave exactly as their favorite baseball star does. The star is well known for sliding head first into bases, so the teenagers do too. The star holds his bat above his head, so the teenagers do too. These young people try anything and everything their idol does, hoping to be like him—they buy the type shoes the star wears, the same glove he uses, the same bat.

Will they succeed in performing like the star, though? We all know the answer quite well. We know that they won't succeed if all they do is try to be like him in the game—no matter how gifted they may be in their own way. And we all understand why. The star performer himself didn't achieve his excellence by trying to behave in a certain way *only during the game*. Instead, he chose an overall life of preparation of mind and body, pouring all his ener-

gies into that total preparation, to provide a foundation in the body's automatic responses and strength for his conscious efforts during the game.

Those exquisite responses we see, the amazing timing and strength such an athlete displays, aren't produced and maintained by the short hours of the game itself. They are available to the athlete for those short and all-important hours because of a daily regimen no one sees. For example, the proper diet and rest and the exercises for specific muscles are not a part of the game itself, but without them the athlete certainly would not perform outstandingly. Some of these daily habits may even seem silly to us, but the successful athlete knows that his disciplines must be undertaken, and undertaken rightly, or all his natural talents and best efforts will go down in defeat to others who *have* disciplined themselves in preparation for game time.

What we find here is true of any human endeavor capable of giving significance to our lives. We are touching upon a general principle of human life. It's true for the public speaker or the musician, the teacher or the surgeon. A successful performance at a moment of crisis rests largely and essentially upon the depths of a self wisely and rigorously prepared in the totality of its being—mind and body.

And what is true of specific activities is, of course, also true of life as a whole. As Plato long ago saw, there is an art of living, and the living is excellent only when the self is prepared in all the depths and dimensions of its being.

Further, this is not a truth to be set aside when we come to our relationship with God. We are saved by grace, of course, and by it alone, and not because we deserve it. That is the basis of God's acceptance of us. But grace does *not* mean that sufficient strength and insight will be automatically "infused" into our being in the moment of need. Abundant evidence for this claim is available precisely in the experience of any Christian. We only have to look at the facts. A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of his body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to act in the manner of Christ

when put to the test without the appropriate exercise in godly living.

As is obvious from the record of his own life, Jesus understood this fact well and lived accordingly. Because of the contemporary bias with which we read the Gospels—a bias we'll be discussing later—we have great difficulty seeing the main emphases in his life. We forget that being the unique Son of God clearly did not relieve him of the necessity of a life of preparation that was mainly spent out of the public eye. In spite of the auspicious events surrounding his birth, he grew up in the seclusion of a simple family in lowly Nazareth. At the age of twelve, as Luke 2:45 tells us, he exhibited astonishing understanding "in the midst of the doctors" in Jerusalem. Yet he returned to his home with his parents and for the next eighteen years was subject to the demands of his family.

Then, after receiving baptism at the hands of his cousin, John the Baptist, Jesus was in solitude and fasted for a month and a half. Afterward, as his ministry proceeded, he was alone much of the time, often spending the entire night in solitude and prayer before serving the needs of his disciples and hearers the following day.

Out of such preparation, Jesus was able to lead a public life of service through teaching and healing. He was able to love his closest companions to the end—even though they often disappointed him greatly and seemed incapable of entering into his faith and works. And then he was able to die a death unsurpassed for its intrinsic beauty and historical effect.

And in this truth lies the secret of the easy yoke: the secret involves living as he lived in the entirety of his life—adopting his overall lifestyle. Following "in his steps" cannot be equated with behaving as he did when he was "on the spot." To live as Christ lived is to live as he did *all* his life.

Our mistake is to think that following Jesus consists in loving our enemies, going the "second mile," turning the other cheek, suffering patiently and hopefully—while living the rest of our lives just as everyone around us does. This is like the aspiring young baseball players mentioned earlier. It's a strategy bound to fail and to make the way of Christ "difficult and left untried." In truth *it is*

not the way of Christ anymore than striving to act in a certain manner in the heat of a game is the way of the champion athlete.

Whatever may have guided us into this false approach, it is simply a mistake. And it will certainly cause us to find Jesus' commands about our actions during specific situations impossibly burdensome—"grievous" as the King James Version of the New Testament puts it. Instead of an easy yoke, all we'll experience is frustration.

But this false approach to following Christ has counterparts throughout human life. It is part of the misguided and whimsical condition of humankind that we so devoutly believe in the power of effort-at-the-moment-of-action alone to accomplish what we want and completely ignore the need for character change in our lives as a whole. The general human failing is to want what is right and important, but at the same time not to commit to the kind of life that will produce the action we know to be right and the condition we want to enjoy. This is the feature of human character that explains why the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We intend what is right, but we avoid the life that would make it reality.

For example, some people would genuinely like to pay their bills and be financially responsible, but they are unwilling to lead the total life that would make that possible. Others would like to have friends and an interesting social life, but they will not adapt themselves so that they become the kind of people for whom such things "come naturally."

The same concept applies on a larger scale. Many people lament the problem of today's tragic sexual behaviors, yet are content to let the role of sex in business, art, journalism, and recreation remain at the depraved level from which such tragedy naturally comes. And others say they would like to get rid of the weapons of warfare, but at the same time they maintain the attitudes and values toward people and nations that make warfare inevitable. We prefer no social unrest or revolution—as long as *our* style of life is preserved.

In his recent book *The Road Less Traveled*, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck observes:

There are many people I know who possess a vision of [personal] evolution yet seem to lack the will for it. They want, and believe it is possible, to skip over the discipline, to find an easy shortcut to sainthood. Often they attempt to attain it by simply imitating the superficialities of saints, retiring to the desert or taking up carpentry. Some even believe that by such imitation they have really become saints and prophets, and are unable to acknowledge that they are still children and face the painful fact that they must start at the beginning and go through the middle.²

So, ironically, in our efforts to avoid the necessary pains of discipline we miss the easy yoke and light burden. We then fall into the rending frustration of trying to do and be the Christian we know we ought to be without the necessary insight and strength that only discipline can provide. We become unbalanced and are unable to handle our lives. Dr. Peck reminds us of Carl Jung's penetrating diagnosis: "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering."³

So, those who say we cannot truly follow Christ turn out to be correct in a sense. We cannot behave "on the spot" as he did and taught if in the rest of our time we live as everybody else does. The "on the spot" episodes are not the place where we can, even by the grace of God, redirect unchristlike but ingrained tendencies of action toward sudden Christlikeness. Our efforts to take control *at that moment* will fail so uniformly and so ingloriously that the whole project of following Christ will appear ridiculous to the watching world. We've all seen this happen.

So, we should be perfectly clear about one thing: Jesus never expected us simply to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, bless those who persecute us, give unto them that ask, and so forth. These responses, generally and rightly understood to be characteristic of Christlikeness, were set forth by him as illustrative of what might be expected of a new kind of person—one who intelligently and steadfastly seeks, above all else, to live within the

rule of God and be possessed by the kind of righteousness that God himself has, as Matthew 6:33 portrays.

Instead, Jesus did invite people to follow him into that sort of life from which behavior such as loving one's enemies will seem like the only sensible and happy thing to do. For a person living that life, the hard thing to do would be to hate the enemy, to turn the supplicant away, or to curse the curser, just as it was for Christ. True Christlikeness, true companionship with Christ, comes at the point where it is hard not to respond as he would.

Oswald Chambers observes: "The Sermon on the Mount is not a set of principles to be obeyed apart from identification with Jesus Christ. The Sermon on the Mount is a statement of the life we will live when the Holy Spirit is getting his way with us."⁴ In other words, no one ever says, "If you want to be a great athlete, go vault eighteen feet, run the mile under four minutes," or "If you want to be a great musician, play the Beethoven violin concerto." Instead, we advise the young artist or athlete to enter a certain kind of overall life, one involving deep associations with qualified people as well as rigorously scheduled time, diet, and activity for the mind and body.

But what would we tell someone who aspired to live well in general? If we are wise, we would tell them to approach life with this same general strategy. So, if we wish to follow Christ—and to walk in the easy yoke with him—we will have to accept his overall way of life as our way of life *totally*. Then, and only then, we may reasonably expect to know by experience how easy is the yoke and how light the burden.

Some decades ago there appeared a very successful Christian novel called *In His Steps*. The plot tells of a chain of tragic events that brings the minister of a prosperous church to realize how unlike Christ's life his own life had become. The minister then leads his congregation in a vow not to do anything without first asking themselves the question, "What would Jesus do in this case?" As the content of the book makes clear, the author took this vow to be the same thing as intending to follow Jesus—to walk precisely "in his steps." It is, of course, a novel, but even in real

life we would count on significant changes in the lives of earnest Christians who took such a vow—just as it happens in that book.

But there is a flaw in this thinking. The book is entirely focused upon trying to do what Jesus supposedly would do in response to *specific choices*. In the book, there's no suggestion that he ever did anything but make right choices from moment to moment. And more interestingly, there is no suggestion that his power to choose rightly was rooted in the kind of overall life he had adopted in order to maintain his inner balance and his connection with his Father. The book does not state that to follow in his steps is to adopt the total manner of life he did. So the idea conveyed is an absolutely fatal one—that to follow him simply means to try to behave as he did when he was “on the spot,” under pressure or persecution or in the spotlight. There is no realization that what he did in such cases was, in a large and essential measure, the natural outflow of the life he lived when not on the spot.

Asking ourselves “What would Jesus do?” when suddenly in the face of an important situation simply is not an adequate discipline or preparation to enable one to live as he lived. It no doubt will do some good and is certainly better than nothing at all, but that act alone is not sufficient to see us boldly and confidently through a crisis, and we could easily find ourselves driven to despair over the powerless tension it will put us through.

The secret of the easy yoke, then, is to learn from Christ how to live our total lives, how to invest all our time and our energies of mind and body as he did. We must learn how to follow his preparations, the disciplines for life in God's rule that enabled him to receive his Father's constant and effective support while doing his will. We have to discover how to enter into his disciplines from where we stand today—and no doubt, how to extend and amplify them to suit our needy cases.

This attitude, this action is our necessary preparation for taking the yoke of Christ and is the subject of the rest of this book. We shall be discussing how to actually follow Christ—to live as he lived. This book is intended for those who would be a disciple of Jesus in *deed*.

Do you believe that such a life is possible? I do. Emphatically. I am writing about what it *means* to follow him and about *how* following him fits into the Christian's salvation. I want to explain, with some precision and detailed fullness, how activities such as solitude, silence, fasting, prayer, service, celebration—disciplines for life in the spiritual kingdom of God and activities in which Jesus deeply immersed himself—are essential to the deliverance of human beings from the concrete power of sin and how they can make the experience of the easy yoke a reality in life. By focusing on the whole of Christ's life and the lives of many who have best succeeded in following him, I will outline a *psychologically and theologically sound, testable way* to meet grace and fully conform to him.

The secret of the easy yoke is simple, actually. It is the intelligent, informed, unyielding resolve to live as Jesus lived in all aspects of his life, not just in the moment of specific choice or action. *The secret described in these pages has been placed within your reach.* In the following pages, you will see both why and how that kind of resolve leads to a life with Jesus, as we begin to form a theology of the disciplines for the spiritual life.

NOTES

Epigraph. W. R. Inge, *Personal Religion and the Life of Devotion* (London: Longmans, Green, 1924), 18.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination: Recommended for the Times*, trans. Edna and Howard Hong (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1940), 76–77.
2. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 77.
3. *Ibid.*, 17.
4. Oswald Chambers, *The Psychology of Redemption*. (London: Simpkin Marshall LTD, 1947) 34.