

## ***Spiritual Disciplines for New Christians***

**TRAVIS:** All right, everybody. Welcome back to the Bible study podcast. I'm Travis Pauley, and here we have one goal: Learn to love like Jesus. I hope you enjoy this episode.

All right. And we're back. Hi, Wes.

**WES:** How are you?

**TRAVIS:** I'm going good. How are you?

**WES:** I'm going great.

**TRAVIS:** Glad to be back.

**WES:** Yeah. Last time we talked was prior to your trip to Africa.

**TRAVIS:** That's right. I just got back from almost two weeks in Kenya.

**WES:** Yeah, that's awesome.

**TRAVIS:** Yeah. So we have a question to discuss today.

**WES:** Yes.

**TRAVIS:** A really good one. I can go ahead and read that.

**WES:** Yeah, sounds good.

**TRAVIS:** It says, "I am a new Christian who recently gave her life to Christ, and I want to know what I should do next. What should I do next to honor Jesus and to let others know about my decision to follow Christ? Thank you."

**WES:** Great question.

**TRAVIS:** Great question.

**WES:** Yeah. I think that there's probably a lot of people that this will apply to, and I think it will be helpful -- I think it'll be a helpful discussion for new

Christians, but I think it will be helpful for a discussion for any Christians to just sort of examine what's the next step.

**TRAVIS:** Yeah. I know something you and I have talked about a lot is, you know, I got baptized pretty young, and it's definitely something I think about sometimes, that it was -- it was well into my Christian life that I really started to truly consider this kind of a question, like what is the next step? What is my responsibility now that I'm buried and raised with Christ? So, yeah, I think this will be a great question for me, too.

**WES:** That personal-experience piece of it is something I didn't even think about talking about, but that's a great point. I was baptized very young, as well. I was nine. And after I was baptized, a guy from church -- I was attending a congregation and my family was members at a church in Lakewood, Colorado, or thereabouts, in the Denver area, and one of the members there -- and I don't think he was on staff. I don't know who he was, but he was a middle-aged guy, and he would take me out to ice cream or get a Coke once a week, and we would talk about the Bible and we would talk about Jesus. Looking back at it, it was pretty remarkable. In fact, the guy that studied with me -- again, I wish I knew -- what an amazing thing that would be, to find that guy and to reconnect with him. But he would read to me from scripture, and he would read out of a Greek New Testament and translate it in his head, and he read to me in English. So an amazing guy, that he would just spend time with this young kid that had put on Jesus in baptism.

And I think that that, in and of itself, is an important thing, and this is what I would say to our listener who e-mailed in. I would say find someone

like that. It may be that someone volunteers to be that for you. It may be the person that taught you the gospel. It may be a parent. It may be a sibling. It may be a friend. But even if somebody doesn't volunteer to be a mentor for you, find somebody like that. I think that all too often, we -- younger people, in general -- this isn't just for new Christians, but, in general, we wait for older people to say, "Hey, I would like to take you under my wing and mentor you," and that doesn't really happen in our culture. I think what's a whole lot more likely is for a younger person to go to an older person and say, "Hey, you seem to be doing this life really well. You seem to be following Jesus really well. I would like to spend time with you. Can I come eat at your house? Can I be mentored by you?" And it may be that the person will say, "No, I can't do that," or, "I'm not qualified to do that," but chances are, that's not going to happen. Chances are, if somebody is mature enough that you would look up to them, if you were to ask them, "Can you mentor me? Can you help me and teach me and encourage me? Maybe even not a formal Bible study; just let me pick your brain about what it's like to follow Jesus," I think that's one of the best things that a person could do.

**TRAVIS:** And I think maybe one of the reasons that it doesn't always work, you know, the older person finding the new Christian, the younger person to kind of mentor, probably is -- and I've certainly witnessed this. Like they might not even think of themselves -- even if they are very far along in their faith, they don't think of themselves as a mentor, as a teacher, and so, yeah, you kind of have to put them on the spot and give them an opportunity to exercise their faith in that way.

**WES:** Yeah, absolutely. And if they are mature followers of Jesus, then they're probably super-humble and they would never, as you said, presume to put themselves in that sort of light or presume to take someone under their wing. Typically, the people that are volunteering to do that, in my experience, are not necessarily the ones that you want mentoring you. You want the humble servants.

I mean, seriously, if anybody's out there listening, and they think, "I want to take my spirituality, my discipleship to the next level," find the person who volunteers quietly behind the scenes and who is serving faithfully and has been for years. And at every church I've ever been a part of, no matter how big or small, there is someone like that, that is consistently volunteering that very few people know about. You may have to ask around to say, "Hey, who prepares communion?" Or, "Who cleans the bathroom?" Or, "Who does this job that nobody else wants to do?" Find that person, follow them around, ask them questions about their faith, ask them questions about following Jesus. That's the kind of person that we should be really learning from.

We tend to think about, well, who's teaching the Bible classes or who's, you know, leading communion focus, or who's preaching, or who's leading singing. Find the quiet, humble servants and follow them around and ask them questions and take them to lunch, take them to dinner, and just find out about what makes them tick. How did they come to Jesus? What have been the things -- the moments in their life that have helped take their life and spirituality to the next level? What have been their mistakes? What mistakes have they made, and what lessons have they learned from those

mistakes?

**TRAVIS:** That's huge, too, is to have somebody in your life that will be open about mistakes.

**WES:** Yes.

**TRAVIS:** Even just so you can know, "Oh, and they got -- they're still here. They're still following Christ. They're still -- they were able to overcome that thing." That's just huge. And I know I was lucky to have people in my home congregation growing up that were very willing and eager to pour into young people, and here, as well.

**WES:** Yeah, absolutely. They're there almost always, and if we'll look for them and put ourselves in their path or put them in our path, it's amazing what we can learn from one another, and so I think that's the biggest thing. That wasn't even what I was planning on talking about in response to this question, but I'm glad you started that off by talking about your own experience. What I would really say, you know, from a more formal standpoint, is spiritual disciplines, and that's really kind of where I want to kind of land on this, but I think that that -- what we just were talking about, about mentorship and being mentored by older Christians, I think that's part of spiritual discipline.

But Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:7-8, he says, "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness. For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." That's something I've been thinking a lot about lately, spiritual disciplines.

Somebody might prefer the term "spiritual practices," but training ourselves,

disciplining ourselves for godliness is something that is incredibly important, maybe more taken for granted in our culture and more overlooked in our culture than it was in times past. In times past, even nonbelieving people, even non-Christians that believed in other things and did other things, they still believed that people needed to be self-disciplined, that they needed to discipline themselves towards a goal, and there are areas of our life that are like that, areas where even secular people would say, "You need to discipline yourself towards a goal." I think, particularly, of sports and athletics, but also things like -- you know, minimalism became a big thing for a while, so there are different disciplines, quote-unquote, that people will adopt that are not Christians, but our world is very undisciplined as a general rule.

**TRAVIS:** And just a cursory look at Instagram or Facebook or TikTok, or whatever, like if you search "discipline," a lot of times what you're going to find is people -- it's discipline to get ahead. It's discipline to get rich. It's discipline to get fit, and -- which, you know, maybe in isolation those things aren't terrible in and of themselves, but it's not discipline spiritually. It's not -- and I think, like you said, the idea behind discipline is towards a goal, I think, inherently, but when you're following Christ, well, then what is the goal to discipline? I think that -- sometimes it's easy to let that stay undefined, especially when you're starting out as a Christian.

**WES:** Right. And Paul here says that the goal is godliness. The goal is to be -- and that word "godliness," it means something like pious, religious, devoted to God. And so, in order to live a godly life, a pious life, a devoted life to God, then we have to discipline ourselves towards that, which means

we have to mortify, put to death the things of the flesh. We have to restrain ourselves. We have to keep ourselves from doing what is bad and force ourselves to do what is good. Discipline has two sides. There's the negative, stopping yourself from doing the bad things, and then also the positive of forcing yourself -- sometimes when you don't feel like it or you don't want to, forcing yourself to do the good things that you should do, that you know you should do, because all of these things are towards something better, that we have -- we have these desires in us that are contrary to one another. Paul puts it that way in Galatians 5 when he's talking about the flesh and the spirit, that the spirit has certain desires for us and the flesh has certain desires, and we have to put to death, or restrain ourselves from indulging the flesh.

And, again, we live in a culture that is very self-indulgent, that is self-indulgent in nearly every way, that says, "Your desires are good. Whatever your desires are, indulge them. Like go live your best life. You do you. Go indulge whatever appetites you have." Whereas people in the ancient world, not just Christians, but all people, recognized that, "No, all your desires are not good. You have to discipline yourself to be virtuous." But in this case, it's not just a vague virtue or even a philosophical virtue. It is the virtue of being godly, of being like Jesus, and the virtue of discipleship. So we have to discipline ourselves towards discipleship to following Jesus.

And if you were to Google or look up online different spiritual disciplines, you'd find different lists. Most of it would have things like scripture reading, prayer, fasting. Those three are primarily the ones that

you'd find: scripture reading, prayer, and fasting. And we'll talk about those, but I think there's others, as well. I like John Mark Comer. There's a great book, and I might recommend this to a new Christian, but it's called "*Live No Lies*," and it's about this war that we're dealing with. The three enemies of the soul are the devil, the flesh, and the world, and scripture kind of talks about all three of those things: the devil and the flesh and the world. And John Mark Comer, in this book, sort of walks through how do we resist the lies of Satan and how do we wrestle against the forces of darkness, Ephesians 6? How do we engage in spiritual warfare? When we say "spiritual warfare," that sounds very mystical or something, but it really is about prayer, scripture reading, fasting, these kinds of things, and practicing these spiritual disciplines.

And in the book, Comer says that a spiritual discipline is really anything that you see Jesus practicing in his life, so if we kind of just read through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and just kind of look and say, what kind of things did Jesus do? Jesus was devoted to scripture. He knew the scriptures. He lived the scriptures. He loved the scriptures. He quoted the scriptures. And so that's really important. If we're going to be followers of Jesus, then we have to be people of the book. We have to know the scriptures. That's why we do a Bible study podcast, because knowing scripture is so important. Not to impress anyone, not to -- not even to teach anyone, but in order to engage in spiritual warfare. Jesus did battle with Satan, not with a sword, not with a spear, not with a bomb, not with a gun. Jesus did warfare with Satan by quoting scripture, by countering Satan's lies with truth, with the truth of scripture, and we have to do the same. In fact,

John Mark Comer talks about this fourth-century desert monk that wrote a book called "*Talking Back*." That's the English translation of the title. The subtitle is, "*A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*." I really love that.

**TRAVIS:** Fantastic.

**WES:** I know, right? And so I've been encouraging people in my Wednesday night class to create a handbook for combating demons. I'll hold it up for the camera, but I've got "Wes' Handbook for Combating Demons," and all it is is things that you struggle with -- ideas, lies that you're tempted to believe -- and then a quotation of scripture that counters that lie. So this is the way Evagrius' handbook was written, and so I've written mine in a similar style, but it just -- each heading or each entry is against the thoughts that -- whatever. So I have a heading in mine against the thought that my circumstance determines my joy, because I'm always struggling with that, that I'm mad, I'm unhappy, I'm discouraged because of whatever it is I'm dealing with. So against the thought that my circumstance determines my joy, and then my scripture for that is Psalm 4:7, which says, "You have put more joy in my heart" -- talking to God: "You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound." So even on my worst day, God has put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound, so my circumstances do not determine my joy. I have more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. Whether I have grain and wine or not, I have more joy in my heart because of God than they have when their grain and wine abound.

So there's -- I won't get real personal with all of my headings, but I

just go through some of the things that I'm struggling with and ideas that I'm tempted to believe, and then write, "Against this thought -- against this thought, or against this demon, against this lie, here is the truth. Here is the scripture," and so a scripture. But it's one thing to write it down, and it's another thing to memorize it and for it to be on our heart where we can quote it over and over and over again against the lie that keeps popping up. Maybe it's a lie that I'm not good enough or I'm not really forgiven or God doesn't love me or I'm worthless, and then we quote whatever it is, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." Just remembering who I am and what I have in Christ, what the truth is to combat the lies, and in order to quote that truth, we have to know that truth.

**TRAVIS:** You know, that makes me think of -- when we read this question, one of the pieces of advice that I got that I thought of that continues to be of great help to me is, you know, several years ago, it was a moment of confusion and feeling lost and directionless, and, you know, this thing didn't work out, and that -- and I was talking to my dad about it, and I sort of droned on for a while about all the problems and struggles, and he just -- you know, he sort of looked at me. He was like, "You said 'I' a lot." And eventually -- it wasn't even something in that conversation, but thinking about, like, yeah, I was thinking about me a lot. I was saying "I" a lot. There was a lot of selfishness wrapped up in that. And then eventually meditating on, well, what is the antidote to that? How do you get out of that loop of self-absorption? Eventually, I settled on gratitude, and that's been -- it continues to be probably the most powerful tool against selfishness, against hopelessness, against frustration, against ego. It all really comes

back to gratitude.

And I think, when I heard people talking about gratitude early on in life, you know, I often thought it was like you're forcing yourself to be thankful for something. "Well, I guess I'm thankful for that" kind of thing, and it was like more and more, I found that if I really thought about something, if I really considered my circumstances and I looked beyond myself -- so already getting beyond selfishness -- and looked at other people's circumstances, I could start to see that I have blessings that I didn't earn, that I didn't necessarily work for, and that I certainly don't deserve at all times. There's never been a time, since I've started to really take that idea of gratitude seriously, where I haven't been able to stop and say, well, it could be a whole lot worse, and I actually have an abundance, and at the very least -- it's not the least, but no matter what's happening, so far, I've been able to go back to "I have Jesus. I have a hope that extends beyond anything that's going to happen in this life." And that, again, to me, is the most powerful antidote I've found in combating demons, in combating the desires of the flesh, and, again, hopelessness and confusion and, certainly, selfishness and ego, is gratitude and really genuinely finding things to be thankful for.

**WES:** And you point out something that's really important, and I think that it's gratitude that's rooted in scripture. I think that -- you know, you said what you have in Jesus, and I think -- I always come back to Ephesians. So, you know, again, to answer -- to keep it in context of what we're talking about, as a new Christian, what should you do, well, one is recognize you're going to do battle against Satan. You're going to do battle with these

demons. You're going to do battle with discouragement, and you're going to have hopelessness. And what do you do in those moments? Well, you keep coming back to the deep well of scripture and keep coming back to that and keep coming back to that. And the Psalms are amazing for that because the Psalms deal with the entire scope of the human condition, the entire scope of our emotions. Ephesians is one of those books where Paul wants Christians to know what they have in Jesus.

And I will contrast that, that gratitude that comes from scripture, with a gratitude that I think the secular world tends to point us to that sometimes I think we're tempted to, you know, grab on to. Not that it's bad, but it's that it's the best the secular world can do, and the best the secular world can do is gratitude by comparison or gratitude by sort of counting their stuff. You know what I mean? When they say count their blessings, but what they really mean is count their stuff, you know, and looking at the stuff that they have. And I really like the saying, "Comparison is the thief of joy," that when we compare ourselves with each other -- and I've really thought about that a lot. I don't want to get stuck on this because we need to come back and have a podcast just on this idea. I've really thought about this a lot, that we tend to gravitate towards comparisons a lot and try to use that as our source of joy or gratitude or whatever, whereas scripture keeps pointing us back to what we have in Jesus, because, like you said, it could always be worse, but for the person for whom it's worst --

**TRAVIS:** There is one person.

**WES:** There is one person, and he has literally the worst situation in the world. What do we tell him to do? It's like, "Well, look at" -- "Well, no,

don't look at him." And so -- but in Jesus, no matter how bad our situation is, we can always go back to the blessings that we have in Christ and the future and the hope that we have in Christ. But I love that, and I think you're right. I think that gratitude is maybe, in and of itself, a spiritual discipline --

**TRAVIS:** I think it is.

**WES:** -- but gratitude that is rooted in scripture. So that's my first one, is for people to keep coming back to scripture, and I love that idea of tying it to gratitude.

The second one that I would say is a spiritual discipline that's necessary, especially for new Christians to think about, and that's identifying and confessing sin. I think sometimes we talk about confessing sin, but we don't necessarily think about identifying sin, and that's maybe not as natural as it seems. Jesus talks about taking the log out of our eye before we take the speck out of someone else's. Sometimes the sin in our life is really evasive and we don't even realize that we're doing it. We don't even realize that it's a sin, and so we have to really sometimes go hunting for it, go hunting for -- "Help me, Father. Help me find what is amiss in my life. Reveal to me my shortcomings." Reveal to me both the sins that are -- we say omission and commission, which are -- commission sins are things that we're doing we shouldn't be doing, but omission are the things we should be doing and we're not, and sometimes we don't even realize that we're doing that. Sometimes we don't realize, wow, I'm really not helping these people. I'm not blessing these people. I'm not serving these people. I'm overlooking these people.

Jesus tells the parable about the rich man and Lazarus -- or some

people say it's not a parable. But Jesus tells the story about the rich man and Lazarus. Maybe the rich man doesn't even know that -- he doesn't realize that he's sinning by leaving a poor beggar at his gate who just wants a crumb of food while he is indulging himself. And, again, we live in a self-indulgent world, and his big sin is that he is neglecting the poor person at his gate. And if we're not really super-intentional about seeking out those sins in our life, then it's really easy to just be comfortable and allow those things to exist and we don't address them.

**TRAVIS:** Yeah. Not to get too heady, but to add on to that, I also think identifying what the sin really is. Sometimes you can go, yeah, I know that's not right what I'm doing, or I'm not doing the right thing here, but I don't know how many times I've -- with a little bit of digging and prayer and God working on my heart, it's eventually come to me that the real sin was not the surface-level thing that was hurtful or wrong, but it was coming from a place of pride. It goes back to pride a lot. It maybe always goes back to pride.

**WES:** The sin behind the sin.

**TRAVIS:** Yeah. And so I think that's -- when you start doing that, when you start getting intentional about that -- I know that's where I actually start to feel and experience God's work on me, where he gets to the heart of it, not just, you know, addressing the symptoms, but actually starting with the disease.

**WES:** And isn't it -- you know, it's interesting how that process of identifying and confessing and repenting of sin seems painful, because it changes our life. It turns our world upside down, but at the same time, it depends on what our goal is. If our goal is to just be comfortable and to just

keep carrying on as we are, then I suppose it's painful to find those things. But if our desire really is to be pleasing to God, then it's actually exciting to find things -- "Oh, I didn't even know I was doing that. Imagine how much better my life is going to be now that I've identified it and I'm getting rid of it."

I always say -- specifically talking about medical diagnoses when I say this, but a diagnosis is always a good thing. It doesn't seem like a good thing, but it's always a good thing, because if you're diagnosed with some disease, that disease existed in you before the diagnosis. The diagnosis isn't the bad thing; the disease is the bad thing. The diagnosis is a good thing because now you're aware of it, and now that you're aware of it, now you can hopefully begin to deal with it. So the diagnosis of sin in our life is not a bad thing. What was the bad thing was that I was doing it all along and was unaware of that sin in my life, and so we should long for sin to be identified in us.

Now, it's one thing for us to self-identify sin. What tends to be the thing -- going back to the pride idea, what tends to be the most painful is when someone else calls out the sin in our life and someone else rebukes us. Proverbs has several different places where the proverbs tell us that it's good to be rebuked and that we should love rebuke; we should love discipline. Why? Because it helps us to be better people. And so if somebody calls out a sin that is -- obviously, not every -- not everybody that calls us a sinner, not everybody that rebukes us, is actually telling the truth. They're not always accurate in their diagnosis. But if they accurately recognize sin in us and they tell us, "Hey, Wes, you're doing this, and this is wrong and sinful," and I

look at it and I'm like, "You're right. I shouldn't be doing that," then what a blessing they've been to you. What a help they've been to you. And so that, in and of itself, preparing ourselves to receive rebuke, rebuking ourselves, disciplining ourselves, those things are incredibly important for anybody who would be a follower of Jesus.

*I just want to take a short break from our Bible study to tell you that if you are enjoying this discussion, you might also enjoy my book "Beyond the Verse." You can find the audio version of the book at [RadicallyChristian.com/audible](http://RadicallyChristian.com/audible). If you're not already an Audible subscriber, you can actually get my book for free when you sign up for a free trial, so go to [RadicallyChristian.com/audible](http://RadicallyChristian.com/audible). Now back to the Bible study.*

**WES:** Okay. We only covered a couple of the spiritual disciplines in the first half of this conversation, so hopefully, we can cover a few more of them in the second half. We mentioned, briefly, prayer and fasting. Those are two others, and those should always go together. When we talk about fasting, we're not talking about dieting. We're not talking about trying to lose weight or something like that. But, again, we recognize these in the life of Jesus. And I've often stopped and thought, if Jesus needed prayer and fasting, who am I to think I don't need to fast? I'm good. Well, if the son of God, who was filled with the Holy Spirit and who acted and lived with this authority and the blessing of God on him -- like if he needed to pray and fast, how much more so do I need to pray and fast? And I think that we discount the value of this more than we should. Any thoughts on either prayer or fasting

or both?

**TRAVIS:** Yeah, I think -- well, definitely hand in hand. I think -- I noticed something recently because I started fasting as a weight-loss -- purely as a weight-loss goal, but one of the things I've experienced, and I think there's -- I've always -- since I started doing it, I've been interested in the science behind it and what's happening when you fast, physically. But one of the things I've experienced is the longer I get into a fast, there's this kind of point where it gets really difficult and maybe I get a little -- I get in a bad mood, I get a little testy. But then there's a point beyond that where I -- like the hunger that you experience -- and this is where it's like I felt like I stumbled upon spiritual benefits even though I was doing it for a different reason, and that was the hunger sort of made all of my other problems fade into the background, because all of a sudden, there was -- there's only one thing wrong. There's only one thing that was difficult. Everything else that was -- that might annoy me or frustrate me or worry me does sort of start to fade into the background.

And, again, this is purely from doing it from the physical side, but it was sort of stumbling upon this benefit that I noticed that I think we're built to do it. Like I think the reason it pops up in scripture is not just from a -- it's interesting to me that it's not just from a spiritual aspect, but also to a physical level, like the reflection it forces you into just because of what you're going through because you're not eating as much as you usually do, I think is something that I've been really interested in, and it's certainly encouraged me to start incorporating it as a spiritual practice because, again, to tie it to prayer -- I think fasting and prayer are both about sort of emptying

yourself, one literally and the other spiritually and mentally, and that ability that we have in Christ, with the veil torn, to lean on God is definitely something that we shouldn't take for granted.

**WES:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think that there's something to be said for -- again, we live in a self-indulgent world, and we're told that the more we indulge ourselves, the more we fulfill our desires, the more authentic we are or the more real we are, the more in touch with our true self we are, and scripture presents just the opposite. Exactly the opposite. That it's through self-denial that we actually are in touch with God, and that we have to, as you said, empty ourselves, deny ourselves, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. And when Jesus did that, he actually -- it's interesting. When you read the account of Jesus in the wilderness, he fasted for 40 days, and there's a parallel between the 40 years of Israel in the wilderness and the 40 days of Jesus in the wilderness, and they both were tempted by Satan. The first Israel failed the test. The second Israel, Jesus, passed the test. He is the true son of God who is faithful to his Father and who resists the lies of the devil, but it's because he's filled with the Holy Spirit and it's because he is relying on the Holy Spirit. He's trusting in God. He doesn't trust in food. He doesn't live by bread alone. He lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

And Jesus is actually stronger -- I used to think that Jesus -- that Satan hit Jesus when he was weak. He's weak in the wilderness because he's just been praying and fasting for 40 days. Actually, that's when he's strong. He is incredibly strong because he has been praying and fasting for 40 days. And so Satan comes and tempts him, actually, at maybe when he's at his

strongest. Jesus is always strong, but he resists Satan because of the strength that he has not in the flesh, but the strength that he has in the Spirit. And fasting helps teach our bodies that, that our strength comes not by bread alone; our strength comes from every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, and it teaches us to prioritize the word of God over the bread alone. It teaches us to prioritize the strength that the Spirit gives over the strength of the body. Even though our body may feel weak, we are being renewed in the Spirit day by day. All of these things, I think, fasting helps remind us about.

**TRAVIS:** What would you say about prayer in terms of -- I guess what I want to ask is, how do you think we get prayer wrong? What would be your advice for somebody --

**WES:** That's a great question.

**TRAVIS:** -- hoping to enrich their prayer life?

**WES:** I think we've tended, especially maybe in churches of Christ -- again, I don't know what other groups may or may not do, but I know that we have moved away from liturgical things, and we've moved more towards -- what do you call it, impromptu, or things that aren't written out. We don't like things that are written out, or wrote, and so we move more towards things that are improvised, and we tend to put more weight on improvised prayers. Where I think there's a lot of value -- there's an entire book of the Bible called the Psalms that are written prayers and praise and songs. And we have songbooks. We used to use them in churches all the time. Now we put them on the screen. But we don't have impromptu songs. We don't say, "Hey, get up here and just have an impromptu song. Off the top of your

head, just from your heart, sing from your heart, and just come up with the words as you go." We would never do that. Instead, we have these songs that create tracks on which to run, and so I would encourage people to pray scripture. Pray the Psalms. Pray the Lord's prayer. Pray these prayers because they actually help to connect with God because they teach us what we ought to be praying for. They give us a way to express our emotion, express our desires, but also to reshape our desires.

We don't -- Paul says, in Romans, we don't even know what to pray for; the Spirit intercedes for us. And if we could acknowledge that, "I don't know what to pray for. All I know is that I'm angry. All I know is that I'm frustrated. All I know is that I feel hopeless." Well, I guarantee you there's a Psalm for that, so learn to pray the Psalms. Learn to pray scripture. Even -- I mean, again, I keep coming back to Ephesians, but there are, I think, three prayers in Ephesians that Paul prays for the church. Pray those prayers. You might have to reword it a little bit to reword it as a prayer from yourself, but reword scripture and pray scripture back to God because God is teaching us how to pray. He's teaching us what to long for. He's teaching us what to hope for and expect, and he knows better than we do what to pray.

**TRAVIS:** I think that is something I've been encouraged by, with traditions in Christianity that place more of an emphasis on the sacraments and in taking part in the sacred, and I think that's actually what you get when you -- what you're a part of when you pray scripture, when you read a psalm, is you're taking part in something that is spiritually sacred, so, yeah, I think that's a great encouragement.

**WES:** And that's not to say that we can't, you know, repeat things out of rote

repetition and not mean it. When I was a kid, I used to always say, "Please bless this food we're about to eat," and one time I said that in Bible class. We were not about to eat food. I just was in the habit of saying, "Please bless this food that I'm about to eat," and my Bible class teacher scolded me and stopped me from saying prayers for a long time, but that's a whole 'nother story, but we do have to be careful with that. But, again, if we have this humble attitude that says scripture knows better how to pray than I do off the top of my head -- that's not to say that we shouldn't also have impromptu prayers or that we shouldn't also have improvised prayers where we just pray from the top of our head. We should do that, too. They're not mutually exclusive. We can do both, and I think we should do both, but that would be my encouragement, is let scripture teach you how to pray.

Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, and for 2,000 years people have been praying the Lord's prayer. And some people argue, well, he didn't mean for that to be a rote prayer. Okay, maybe not. But we could do a lot worse than praying what Jesus said, "Pray this way," and so, yeah, pray this way. You can add to it. I mean, you can say these words that Jesus gave us and then put in there your own words.

**TRAVIS:** Continue on in that spirit.

**WES:** Absolutely.

**TRAVIS:** I've heard people do that a lot, where they use the prayer as a starting point.

**WES:** Okay. So prayer, fasting. Another one would be silence and solitude. We see Jesus doing that. Mark 1:35, "Rising very early in the morning while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place

and there he prayed." Again, if Jesus needed to spend time in silence and solitude, if he needed to go to a desolate place and pray, what makes me think that I don't need to? Or, especially in our busy, loud world, what makes me think that I could have the spiritual life that I need to have when I'm bombarded with messages from the world, messages that aren't true, messages that are whatever, and I'm just bombarded with information and entertainment and ideas constantly? If Jesus needed to remove himself from the noise, man, I need to remove myself even more.

**TRAVIS:** A friend of ours -- we were just having a conversation about this, that a friend encouraged him recently. He was sort of talking about, you know, attending to responsibilities and staying involved and not -- but it was starting to build up and create a little burnout, and his friend said, "You know, Jesus needed to go away. Are you better? Are you better than him?"

**WES:** That's right.

**TRAVIS:** So that's definitely something -- that idea of burnout, I think, is something our culture talks a lot about, but I do think that that is something we see over and over again in the gospels, that Jesus, you know, kind of disappears. The way it's written sometimes, it's like --

**WES:** Yeah, sometimes they were looking for him.

**TRAVIS:** They're looking for him, and he's just gone. He's out, you know, on the other side of the sea. And so I think doing that responsibly and knowing when it's time to take a break, that's hard to do, but it's really important.

**WES:** And that really goes to the idea that God worked into the week rhythms of rest. The Sabbath rest was part of the weekly rhythm. It was

also part of the -- every seven years, it was supposed to be, and it was also supposed to be part of the every seven-seven years, and so they were supposed to have these rhythms of rest and rejuvenation. This idea -- because it is a lie that we tell ourselves that if I stop doing, the world will come crashing down. If I stop going, if I stop working, if I stop toiling, then everything is going to come crashing down, and I need -- it's a discipline for me to rest and to say it does not all rely on me. God is going to keep the world spinning even when I rest. Even on the Sabbath, God -- if I rest, God is still working. God is still operating. God is still in control, which means I need to work-trust in God, but I also need to rest-trust in God.

**TRAVIS:** I was thinking of the two big moments we get about the Sabbath in the commandments. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Fast-forward to Jesus telling the Pharisees the Sabbath was not made for God, but for man.

**WES:** Man wasn't made for the Sabbath, but Sabbath was made for man.

**TRAVIS:** That's right. So it's not that you're keeping the Sabbath holy for yourself; it's that God gave you the Sabbath, and you're to honor it in order to trust him that the world will keep spinning, that he will keep going.

**WES:** It's a blessing, and they made the Sabbath a burden. It was supposed to be a blessing, but they were making it burdensome to keep the Sabbath, and Jesus is saying you weren't made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made for you. What an amazing gift this God is that gave his people a day of rest. This was unique in the ancient world, that God gave these people -- just ordinary people, these former slaves, these refugees from Egypt that escaped out of slavery, and God's like, hey, one day a week, it's yours. Take it,

worship me, keep it holy, and rest. Don't work. I mean, it wasn't real specific about the rules. Just keep it holy, keep it separate, keep it sacred, and rest, and what an amazing blessing. But then, as man does, they corrupted it and made it more of a burden than it was supposed to be. And so, again, we could get really legalistic about when and how, all of these things, but we've got to build into our lives rhythms of rest, of silence, solitude.

I've begun to -- I took a while where it was just Facebook, and I was like no Facebook on Saturdays. And now it's more like no -- as much as -- I need to do a better job at this, but no smartphone on Saturdays. It's really hard to say no phone because I still need to be reachable, I still need to use the GPS to go places. But I'm trying to use the tools that are built into my iPhone to turn off everything, to use time limits, downtime, the little focus. In fact, I have a focus on my phone. Now you can set it up with a preset focus, a customized focus, and I have a Sabbath focus. And so on Saturday -- the beginning of Saturday it turns on, and then at the end of Saturday, it turns off. But it shuts off pretty much everything. My watch face on my smart watch, it changes; the background on my phone changes. It doesn't send me notifications on Saturday. I'm trying really hard to discipline myself to build that silence. And, again, it's not total silence. I can't spend -- I'm not going to spend the whole day away from my family or away from everything else. We've tried to do like a family Sabbath on Saturdays. It's really hard. You know, it's really hard in our world today to do that kind of thing, but we've got to find ways to spend time with God, to be quiet, to unplug from all the noise and all the world and just be silent and

be in solitude as much as we can.

The sixth one is giving and serving. This is obviously a spiritual discipline. Again, the idea is that as we give and serve, as we do for others, as we consider others more significant than ourselves -- Philippians 2 -- and we look out for their interest and not only our own interest, we are becoming like Jesus. We are practicing the gospel. I thought of a phrase the other day, and it goes back to the very beginning of this podcast. Our original cohost to this podcast, Sam Dominguez, used to always say that God -- or Jesus called us to be disciples, not philosophers. Another way to put that might be that he called us to be practitioners and not philosophers, that the way of Jesus is something we practice. It's not just something we think about. It's not an idea. This isn't an ideology; this is a practice. This is something that we're practicing, and so there's very tangible things that we can do, and we do them with the mental intention of putting others and considering others more significant than ourselves and doing for them what Jesus did for us. Then we are actually being shaped into the image of Jesus by laying down our lives for others, by seeking the good of others, by considering others more significant than ourselves. So giving and serving becomes a very important part of spiritual disciplines.

**TRAVIS:** I recently heard some advice on that, that -- because it's one of those things we all know we should do and then we don't do it, maybe. But the advice I heard recently on that, that I'm going to try to incorporate more and more is praying ahead of certain situations and, you know, certain events or new things that you're doing, or routine things that you're doing, but to pray ahead of time, "God, you know, would you present opportunities for me

and help me to see them to give and to serve?" And I thought that was -- having experienced so many benefits from being intentional about prayer and experiencing the grace of God, that if you pray --

**WES:** Watch out.

**TRAVIS:** Yeah, watch out, but he's listening. You're not just speaking to the sky; you are speaking to God. You're speaking to your God that loves you and wants the best for you. And I think if you're praying, "Would you present opportunities for me to give and serve," he's going to answer that.

**WES:** He's going to be there, yeah, absolutely.

**TRAVIS:** That's something I'm looking forward to being more intentional about.

**WES:** I love the story about the community that was looking for rain, and they had a prayer meeting for rain and they all showed up at this -- you know, Farmer Jones' farm, and they were going to pray for rain. And the preacher got up and looked around and he admonished everybody, asking them, "Where's your umbrellas?" You know, I mean, that's the thing. We should pray and look for God to open doors, and -- but so often we're not praying. We're not asking. We're not --

**TRAVIS:** Praying is kind of a last resort as opposed to the first line of defense.

**WES:** Absolutely, yeah. Okay. And then, finally, number seven on my list is gathering. We don't normally see this on a list of spiritual disciplines, but I think it needs to be included: Gathering. And when I say "gathering," I mean more than just come to church, you know, come to the Sunday assembly. I mean be part of the church. It's so important. It goes back to

what we started with. When you become a Christian, be with other people. We are made for community. The word "church" -- the Greek word is "ecclesia," and a lot of people put a lot of emphasis on what might be the etymology of the Greek word "ecclesia," and they say, well, it means called out -- called-out people. And their emphasis there is that we're separated. We're called out of the world and we're a separate people. That's not how the Greek word was used in the first century. It wasn't used to say, "Hey, you're a separate group of people." That's not how the word was used. That might be the etymology of it, but, again, "catfish" doesn't mean a fish that is a cat or -- well, it kind of does actually mean -- it doesn't mean a cat that can fish. Or a "housefly" doesn't mean a flying house. You know, you can't just take the two parts of a word and say, well, it's this.

So what's important is how the word was used. "Ecclesia" meant an assembly of people. Specifically, it was about a community assembly, a community that came together to talk about the business of the community, of the city. And so when Jesus says that we are his ecclesia, we are his gathered people, we are his community of people that have come together in the name of Jesus, we are his city, we are his kingdom, we are his citizens -- and so, yes, it's true we're called out. Yes, it's true we're separated from the world, but that's not the emphasis of the word "ecclesia." The emphasis of the word "ecclesia" is gathering, coming together. And when the Hebrew writer encourages his audience not to fall away, he admonishes them to not forsake the coming together, the assembly. There, it's like the synagoguing of yourselves, coming together into these Messianic synagogues, encouraging one another, building one another up. This is from Hebrews 10.

So he's encouraging them to keep coming together. That's what the church does. The church sticks together. Yes, on Sundays, but daily. We should be together as much as we can. So if you're a new Christian, be together with your brothers and sisters. Be together with them for breakfast, for lunch, for supper, for devotionals, for Bible studies, for encouragement, for confessing your sins. Just be with your brothers and sisters as much as you possibly can. Make time. Be intentional about gathering together with them and for them. Gather together to encourage them and to build them up.

**TRAVIS:** Yeah, we can't do it alone, right?

**WES:** Yeah, that's exactly right. We live in a hyper-individualistic culture, that even in Christianity, we act like spiritual disciplines are a solo, Lone Ranger kind of thing, and you're right; we can't do it alone.

*Thank you so much for being part of the Radically Christian Bible Study podcast today. We hope that you've enjoyed this episode. I want to give a special thanks to Travis Pauley and to our McDermott Road church family for making this podcast possible. As always, we love you, God loves you, and we hope that you have a wonderful day.*