

# CONNECT 101 – Five Gospel Fruits

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## Lesson 1 - Introduction

### Questions to Consider:

1. What place do the “Spiritual Disciplines” have in the life of the believer?
2. By what standards do we measure our own spiritual health and growth? Who sets the standard?
3. How can rethinking the way we view these activities change the way we think about our relationship with God and His view of us?

The purpose of this current study is to help you “stay in *Story*.” For the next several weeks, we will be looking at various means God has put in play to assist us to live in *Story*.

### The Big Picture:

God created so that the fellowship He has within Himself would be shared by those He creates for their joy (Hab. 2:14). Thus, He designed us for joy. Moreover, this joy is only possible in Him. The individual mission of His people is to share this simple message with others (Matthew 28:18-20). Enabling us in our own mission can happen through the disciplines. This study is seeking to explain what some of these ‘disciplines’ are from the Gospel of Luke.

The Scripture speaks of believers growing in the true knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). The thought of growth presupposes means. Many conclude the means are the spiritual disciplines. Activities such as Bible reading, Christian prayer or meditation/silence, and fasting are part of those means often leveraged by Christians wishing to grow. Yet, do such activities cause growth? The conversation is lengthy, but the premise of these studies is that all the believer needs they already have in Christ. Thus, growth is simply resting in what is true. The resting can have the appearance of running, wrestling, sitting, standing, and walking, but all such expenditures of energy have as their object Jesus. Who is He, what has He done, and who are His people because of this? Those are the questions the disciplines discover and answer.

The Scripture speaks of such practices where we remember Him for our rest and joy. Often we view these practices, such as going to Church, Scripture and Prayer as chores or duties, when in reality He provides us such activities for our joy. Therefore, is it possible we are reading what the Bible says about these things incorrectly?

One of the questions confronting us when handling the biblical text is its application to us. When reading the Scriptures there is a pattern for understanding the text. **First**, what did the text mean to them/then, the original readers? How did they hear/read that text? There are forces shaping their understanding of the text. Areas such as cultural, historical, literary, and theological [Second Temple / Old Testament] context shape their understanding of the message. **Second**, what does this text teach us about Jesus? If all biblical revelation points to Him, then how does this text

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reveal Jesus? **Finally**, what does the text mean to us/now? What is the “take away”? The “take away” is more constricted than we often think or wish to make it. If we follow this pattern, we will cut a true path in interpreting and applying Scripture.

## **The Problem:**

Initially, there are several common problems facing us as we discuss this matter.

- First, we think the disciplines will fix what is broken. The impression one has when speaking of the disciplines is fixing and/or changing. We sell them as if the activity will make our relationship with God flourish. Our view of the activity is not thought-based, but emotion-based. We want to feel differently about [fill in the blank]. When people say, “I just don’t feel close to God,” they are “thinking” with their emotions. They want sensory experience. This is why Bible Conferences and Christian Concerts are popular. Yet only Jesus fixes what is broken and what is broken is our relationship with God. In our justification, Jesus fixes our relational brokenness.
- Second, we tend to think the disciplines will change our relationship with God. Such thinking believes the health of our relationship with God is the result of what we do, rather than on what Jesus did. Yet, the intent of the activities we noted enable us to understand just how blessed we are in Jesus.
- Third, if the above two points mark our approach, then we make them man-centered and not God-centered. We teach them as if they are activities we do for God. This walks us into our fourth point.
- Fourth, if the disciplines are in any way horizontal, then they relate to our relationship with “one another.” They are what we do as community. That is not to say we do not do such activities individually or in isolation, but **their design is for community**. Yet, the horizontal never defines or explains the vertical. My relationship with God defines and establishes my relationship with “one another.” Many of us know people who do these things personally, but have no alignment with a local church. The design of these activities is for community. We know this because the New Testament is a Book of Community.

For example, the Temple was a place of prayer. It was where people prayed to God. They did this as an expression of personal faith, but as part of the believing community. The same is true concerning Scripture. The Hebrew Scripture was in the Temple and read by the priest in the hearing of all. No individual believer had a copy of the Word of God. The same is true concerning the New Testament text. It was not until the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, we agreed on the New Testament Canon and it was not until the 15<sup>th</sup> century we had the printing press. Beyond this, it was some time before the populace at large was literate. The point being, the idea of having one’s own private time around the word was almost unheard of until the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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What we have made personal and private was corporate and public.

Spiritual growth was a community activity tied to the believing assembly. Thus, when walking with a new believer, initial encouragement should be toward the corporate [i.e. go to church and participate in the family] rather than private [i.e. developing the habit of prayer, bible study, etc.]. Unfortunately, such thinking is foreign to us.

- Fifth, we make them meritorious. We think such activity merits God's favor and blessing.

The disciplines do not secure for us God's favor or blessing expanded on in our introduction. The disciplines help us discover just how blessed and fortunate we already are in Christ. The disciplines enable the people of God to remember the *Story* of God. We handle these activities as if our relationship with God is a business transaction. We superimpose our sin driven world of conquest and advancement with the spirit world, when the two are not the same. "We put a nickel in and expect a dime back." It is like a gumball machine. We treat the disciplines as if they are the lamp containing the genie and if we rub the lamp out will pop the genie and grant us three wishes. **Friend, if you think God will judge you or withhold His blessings from you for not doing these things, you have the wrong view of your relationship to God.** We do these "things" because they bring us joy. These activities enable us to see how blessed we already are in Christ. **As we will see, we are not in bondage to these things.** They are our servants, not our masters. Friend, the New Testament is not a document describing our work for Him, but His work for us. The disciplines are enabling us to understand the *Story* more fully and thus live out the *Story* in our daily circumstances.

- Sixth, we fail to see how God establishes these activities for our joy and His glory.

Again, the very idea of the "disciplines" sounds more like a "paddle" than a "lollipop." We have made "rabbits feet" out of church attendance, bible reading, prayer, giving, and going when these are things God does for us for our joy. Unfortunately, we use the activities to either feel good about what we do [i.e. works-based righteousness] or produce guilt in others who fail to do them in our prescribed way. **Either end is wrong.**

Initially, let us consider this statement by Tullian Tchividjian on discipleship/sanctification:

## **What are you learning about life and following Jesus?**

[Begin quote] "I'm learning, in the words of Eugene Peterson, that "discipleship is a process of paying more and more attention to God's righteousness and less and less attention to our own." The way many of us think about sanctification is, well, not very sanctified. In fact, it's terribly narcissistic. We spend too much time thinking about how we're doing, if we're growing, whether we're doing it right or not. We spend too much time pondering our spiritual failures and brooding

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over our spiritual successes. Somewhere along the way we've come to believe that the focus of the Christian faith is the life of the Christian."

"Ironically, I've discovered that the more I focus on my need to get better, the worse I actually get—I become neurotic and self-absorbed. Preoccupation with our performance over Christ's performance for us actually hinders spiritual growth because it makes us increasingly self-centered and morbidly introspective—the exact opposite of how the Bible describes what it means to be sanctified. Sanctification is forgetting about yourself. "He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:30) properly describes the painful sanctification process. "Decreasing" is impossible for the one who keeps thinking about himself. As J. C. Kromsigt said, "The good seed cannot flourish when it is repeatedly dug up for the purpose of examining its growth." Thankfully, the focus of the Bible is *not* the work of the redeemed but the work of the Redeemer. The gospel frees us from ourselves. It announces that this whole thing is about Jesus and dependent on Jesus. The good news is the declaration of his victory for us, not our "victorious Christian life." The gospel asserts that God's final word over a Christian has already been spoken: "Paid in full." [End of quote]

When we speak of the Christian life, we often reference such thinking as the disciplines of the Christian life. For years, I have questioned our approach to these areas. Even the labeling of the idea as a discipline does not set well with me. Years before I came to understand the power of the gospel, I regularly taught on the importance of the disciplines in the life of the disciple. I want to share with you what I once taught so I can contrast this with where I now am.

Why the disciplines? The disciplines enable the believer to . . .

1. Separate from the deeds of the flesh (2 Cor. 7:1).

"Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

2. To lay aside the works of darkness (Rom. 13:12).

"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light" (Rom. 13:12).

3. To put off the old man (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9).

"That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts" (Eph. 4:22).

"Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds" (Col. 3:9)

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4. To make no provision for the flesh (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 5:13).

“But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to *fulfil* the lusts *thereof*” (Rom. 13:14)

“For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only *use* not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

5. To put to death the deeds of the flesh (Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5).

“For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Rom. 8:13).

“Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5).

Notice something about the five reasons listed; all of them are negative. All of them have as their focus the putting off the old and our war against the sins of the flesh, the world and the devil. None of them speaks of Jesus and His place in the *Story*.

When supporting this idea we often turn to 1 Tim. 4:7. In fact, turn with me to 1 Timothy 4:7 notice what it says: "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." (NASB). Listen to the strength of the following verses.

“But thou, O man of God, **flee these things; and follow after** righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness” (1 Tim. 6:11).

<sup>21</sup> “**If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor**, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, *and* prepared unto every good work. <sup>22</sup> **Flee** also youthful lusts: **but follow righteousness**, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:21, 22)

“**Follow** peace with all *men*, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

I want you to notice something. I do not deny the verse, but I do believe we have replaced Jesus with holiness. There is no holiness apart from Him. We do not attain holiness. **Holiness is something received.** Jesus is holiness embodied and when we are in Him, we are holy. I have taught that I do not wake up each day seeking to keep the commands of Scripture. I wake up every day seeking Jesus. I do not think about the commands, I think about Jesus. I recognize there might be a grinding of gears in your thinking right now, but reflect on this for a moment.

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When 1 Corinthians 13 speaks of love, is it not speaking of JESUS? When the Proverbs highlight wisdom, are they not speaking to us of JESUS? When Paul tells us to think on these things in Philippians 4:8, is he not inviting us to think of JESUS?

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

Often, we assume we agree on these things. Nevertheless, I really believe people preach imperatives without preaching JESUS. I believe Christians believe they are good because they obey rather than being good because HE IS GOOD.

Could we not equally read the previous verses in the following manner and still make perfect or better sense of what they are saying if we change but one word?

“Discipline yourself for the purpose of **JESUS**” (1 Tim. 4:7).

“But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after **JESUS**” (1 Tim. 6:11).

<sup>21</sup> “If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, *and* prepared unto every good work. <sup>22</sup> Flee also youthful lusts: but follow **JESUS**, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:21, 22).

“Follow **JESUS** with all *men*, and **JESUS**, without which no man shall see the Lord:” (Heb. 12:14).

What are commonly referred to as spiritual exercises are for nothing more or less than to keep us in *Story*. The absence or presence of such activities can be misused by producing guilt by their absence or pride by their presence, but no such activity on our part changes God's perspective of us or our standing before Him. The cross answers the issue of being better. By engaging in the disciplines/activities, you live life from God's perspective and in so doing live His freedom, His peace and His rest.

Very popular people have written on these topics and for the most part, I disagree with them. I believe their approach removes from the action the gospel. Much of what these people write in other areas I would agree with, but anytime we deviate from the cross in our personal walk with God I differ with them.

We speak of the disciplines with the intent of growing in JESUS. However, what do we mean by Christian growth? Think about this with me for the moment. We mark growth in a child by their ability to do things on their own without help. We speak of growth in terms of independence, the ability to take care of yourself and function without your parents, but is this really our goal in Christian growth? Christian growth is the awareness that everything comes from God, is sustained by God and if for the glory of God. The Christian life is lived in complete dependence

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on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christian maturity does not produce an independent spirit, but a dependent spirit. Christian maturity does not happen in one's absence from the believing community, but rather by their presence in the Christian community. The Christian life is recognizing how every moment and every circumstance is from Him, sustained by Him and ultimately for Him. If this were true, then why would I practice/pursue the disciplines?

Consider with me the use of the word "growth" in the NT. The word we are considering is **auxano**. It is "a prolonged form of a primary verb; to grow ("wax"), i.e. enlarge (literal or figurative, active or passive):--grow (up), (give the) increase."<sup>1</sup>

Its first occurrence in the NT is Matthew 6:28 where we read, "And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin" (Luke 12:27). Notice it is a growth without labor. In several passages the word is used agriculturally (Matt. 13:32; Mark 4:8; Luke 13:19).

It is also used of John the Baptizer (Luke 1:80) and of Jesus (Luke 2:40) as they grew as children. John uses the word in his famous statement, "He must increase [grow – come to prominence], but I must decrease [fade into the background]" (John 3:30).

Luke uses the word to describe the spreading of the Word of God in Acts 6:7; 12:24 and 19:20.

- "And the word of God **increased**; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).
- "But the word of God **grew** and multiplied" (Acts 12:24).
- "So mightily **grew** the word of God and prevailed" (Acts 19:20).

It also is used of numbers expanding and increasing (Acts 7:17, "But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt").

Paul uses the word to describe the consequence of the Word increasing as coming from God (1 Cor. 3:6, 7). Only God can cause/produce "growth." He echoes this idea in Col. 2:19.

- "And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, **increaseth with the increase of God**" (Col. 2:19).

Paul uses the word in the following manner.

- "Now he that ministereth seed to the sower both minister bread for your food, and multiply your seed sown, and **increase the fruits of your righteousness**" (2 Cor. 9:10).

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- “Not boasting of things without our measure, that is, of other men's labours; but having hope, **when your faith is increased**, that we shall be enlarged by you according to our rule abundantly” (2 Cor. 10:15).
- “In whom all the **building fitly framed together groweth** unto an holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21).
- But speaking the truth in love, **may grow up into him in all things**, which is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

Peter likewise uses the word in the following two passages.

- “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that **ye may grow thereby**” (1 Pet. 2:2).
- “But **grow in grace**, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen” (2 Pet. 3:18).

Paul parallels this idea in Colossians 1:10.

- “That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and **increasing in the knowledge of God**” (Col. 1:10). [being fruitful and increasing are in synonymous parallelism]

Notice how Peter also ties growth with Word/knowledge. If understood correctly, there is no growth apart from Word/instruction/knowledge. Hear me, Word/instruction/knowledge do not guarantee growth in the gospel; but without Word/instruction/knowledge ones depth in grace/gospel is strained. **How can you love what you do not know?** If however you've placed yourself under the Word, God can use your circumstances to “trigger” application/understanding so that you read your circumstances in the context of it coming from God, sustained by God, and for God.

As I have already stressed, my intent is to reprogram the way we apply the gospel in our relationship with God. Think about how we shape this conversation. Let us begin by writing down ten things that bring you joy; that can or would make you happy. It can be anything. Now, put them in descending order. Now pick out the very best one. Listen to what John the Apostle noted as being his single greatest joy, to hear that his spiritual children walked in truth (3 John 4).

John had seen a lot, but his greatest joy was to know that his spiritual children were living obedient lives. Listen carefully to 3 John 4. “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.” The idea of “to walk” means, “to regulate one's life, to conduct one's self; to pass one's life.”

The source of John's joy was that his spiritual offspring were regulating their lives by the truth of God's Word. Their lives were marked by obedience [I will explain this idea in a moment]. He says the same thought in 2 John 4, “I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as

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we have received a commandment from the Father.” John’s rejoicing was excessive and exceedingly beyond measure. To say the least it brought John great joy to know that his children were obeying the truths of Scripture.

John uses one of our current buzzwords and it is obedience. Another one of those buzz words is discipleship. Yet what is obedience, what is discipleship?

First, what is obedience?

We have made obedience a very dark and foreboding act. By making obedience something we do we strip from obedience the joy it was meant to bring. By telling people they have to obey is like telling a child they have to hug and kiss their sibling or tell them they are sorry for some wrong done. They might “obey” out of sheer fear, but they have no love or joy in the doing of it or telling a child to clean their room. Both acts are necessary, but neither are caused by love but most probably fear. Yet, our obedience is nothing more or less than the fruit of the Holy Spirit. **It is our love for God produced by His love for us that makes our obedience descriptive rather than prescriptive.** In addition, there is also a collective fruit produced by the Holy Spirit in and through His community that we will attempt to note throughout our study. Such fruit is good works and obedience.

Second, what is discipleship?

A disciple of Jesus is one who leaves off his own work and who affirms all that Jesus is and does in his behalf before the Father. There is nothing mysterious about discipleship. You either are or are not a follower of Jesus. The followers of Jesus obey Jesus. Such obedience is a consequence of the relationship not the cause of the relationship. In addition, as it relates to our obedience please keep in mind our previous thought concerning obedience. The thought that we have varying levels or categories of discipleship speaks more to our failure at guarding the front end of the process rather than the process itself. Our failure sadly causes us to question whether someone is actually saved rather than simply being a poor disciple.

In light of this lengthy introduction, I offer you several areas that can enable us in our desire to stay in *Story* and thus savor our joy in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

An additional problem needing addressing is the individual and solitary nature of how we express them. The Bible speaks of communion in community. Salvation rescues individuals for community. Thus the exercising of the disciplines are not so much individual actions as much as community actions. This does not mean the community does this for the individual. However, it does mean the individual is part of a community exercise when they engage in the disciplines. This is a primary thrust of the study.

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In this booklet, we will consider five areas in our lives impacted by the gospel. There is already a familiarity to these areas because they make up a large part of our **community** activity. Many label such areas as Christian disciplines. They are as follows:

1. Jesus and Church
2. Jesus and Scripture
3. Jesus and Prayer
4. Jesus and Generosity
5. Jesus and Mission

If such an approach is wrong, then how are we to understand these areas? You are saved as an individual for community. You are born into a family.

- We gather as community. God created a place where we can gather for our joy.
- We read as community. God gives us the biblical text so we can learn of Him and His work.
- We pray as community. God invites us to pray so that we might know the joy of intimacy.
- We give as community. God gives to us and through us His resources so we might extend His joy.
- We go as community. God works in us and through us to those around us in gathering others for our joy and His glory.

No one in the early church would separate their faith in the Messiah from the gathering of God's people in geographically distinct locations. No one in the early church would have separated his or her personal growth from the community of faith.

Every one of these activities you can do individually. Yet, their design is corporate. Moreover, the "ought" of this is for joy. Unfortunately, we often approach the activities like a triathlon. We swim, bike, and run always attempting to better our time. Nevertheless, the triathlon is not a team sport. Perhaps the activities are more like basketball. Without a team, the game does not happen. Each person comes with the necessary skills but each have strengths and weaknesses supported by the other players.

The corporate enables us to enjoy all of the activities without us attempting to make weaknesses strengths.

If I make the activity mandatory, you will feel guilty. You will try harder and you will fail. Moreover, I will "pitch" the solution to your failure and we will repeat the cycle. **What is to be normal we often make necessary.** The difference between the two ideas is one of fruit versus work.

The emphasis is not on what we do for God, but on what He does for us. Moreover, we do not believe anything we do merits favor from God. In addition, we also do not believe anything is

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essential to maintain our relationship to God. The only thing you need is Jesus. Friend, this is hard to grasp.

We teach people how Christ remains faithful even when we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13). We provide a voice for Christians who are both Sinner & Saint (Romans 7:15-25). We promote the bad news that you are a greater sinner than you think (Isaiah 64:6-7) and the good news that Christ is a greater Savior than you can imagine (Romans 5:6-11).

Furthermore, ***He will never let you go*** (Hebrews 13:5-6).

- We hold that life is not about what we do for God, but about what God has done for us
- We hold that “Gospel” is not something you can live, but it is something you can believe
- We hold that grace is freely offered to all, and we need it just as much as everyone else<sup>2</sup>

The disciplines do not make us Christian. Nothing we do or not do makes us any more or less Christian. However, the disciplines are there for our joy/life by increasing our understanding of God’s unconditional love for us. The following chapters will explore what Jesus had to say about Church, Scripture, Prayer, Generosity, and Mission primarily using the Gospel of Luke. The intent is to show us what our relationship is to each of these “fruits.” May this journey prove to you a source of joy.

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<sup>1</sup> Strong’s Greek Dictionary for **auxano**.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.christholdfast.org/about/>

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