The Science Behind, Spiritually, Knocking Out of the Park

Spiritual Disciplines (Selected Verses)

Picture the bottom of the 9th inning in the World Series. Two outs, a runner at 2nd and 3rd, your team is down by one run and the coach chooses you to pinch hit.

This is would be a make or break kind of moment.

How would you know if you were ready for such a huge task?

I set up this scenario to help illustrate one simple principle none of us can conquer huge tasks without first taking little steps. It’s the little things that lead to big victories. Let me go on a little with the baseball analogy. The following excerpt is from baseball hittingaid.com.

From release of the pitch, a 95 MPH fastball takes about 400 ms to reach the plate and on average it takes an MLB player 150 ms to get their bat around. In addition, it takes approximately 100 ms for the brain to process an image, in this case, the baseball, and 25 ms for the brain to send a signal to the body to swing. So, that leaves 125 ms to decide whether to swing or not and how.

The batter must predict the ball’s path subject to a variety of pitch types. Since pitch recognition has to occur in a fourth of the amount of time it takes to blink, it is mostly a learned reaction. An experienced hitter’s brain is capable of anticipating information it has not yet received – identifying the possible trajectory of the ball before it even leaves the pitcher’s hand.

Once a decision is made, a signal in the eye sends a message to a part of the brain that controls the muscles. The brain must then send a signal to the muscles, telling them to swing. The batter has a 7 ms margin of error to connect with the ball. Swinging too early or too late will generally produce a swing and miss or weak contact. However, optimal timing and proper bat path through the strike zone allow for various points of contact, which helps the hitter impact the ball more consistently. Developing the muscle memory needed for keeping the barrel in the hitting zone for as long as possible increases a hitter’s chance of success each at-bat and is one of the most important aspects of baseball hitting mechanics.

How do hitters develop this kind of muscle memory?

Choosing the right bat for their size and ability (Or getting stronger in order to use a bat)

Learning the proper way to hold the bat

Learning where to line up their feet (open stance, closed stance, neutral stance)

Swinging their bat in a mirror (or maybe even taking a video of their swing)

Hitting a ball off of a tee

Hitting a ball via soft toss

Hitting slow batting practice and progressing to faster and faster pitches while going back and practicing all of the fundamentals and strengthening techniques over and over.

If you were planning to hit a 95 mile an hour fastball, hitting off of a tee could seem pretty insignificant. You might even think it was pointless.

You may find it interesting that most Major League baseball players use a tee every day. The truth is that guys who can actually hit a 95 mile an hour fastball use a tee every day.

Using the tee every day does not guarantee that you will get a game winning hit in the bottom of the 9th, but if you never use a tee it’s likely that you will not get a hit and it fact, you may not even earn an at bat.

My point is that doing the little things is the only way you can develop the skills needed to accomplish the big things. This is true in any discipline. Spiritual discipline is no different. You are not going to spiritually “knock it out of the park,” without doing the little things. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he said:

“27 I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.” 1 Corinthians 9:27 NLT

If this is true what are some of the fundamental disciplines that we should be doing in our Christian walk?

I’m going to share twelve things that are foundational, that will help us be ready when God puts us up in the bottom of the 9th.

I will list them first.

Study

Meditation

Prayer

Fasting

Simplicity

Solitude

Submission

Service

Confession

Worship

Guidance

Celebration

I didn’t make this list up and I am not saying that this list is comprehensive, but I think it is a very good list. Now let’s take a brief look at the first six of these by defining them and considering some biblical examples. And next week we will look at the remaining six on the list.

First, we will begin with **study**. The Webster’s Dictionary defines study as “a careful examination or analysis of something.”

In the book of Joshua God’s words are recorded as saying:

8 Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do.

Joshua 1:8 NLT

2 Timothy 3:16 reminds us that:

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.

2 Timothy 3:16

And Romans 15:4 says:

4 Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God’s promises to be fulfilled.

Romans 15:4

But the Bible is not the only thing we should study. The Bible itself confirms this.

David once wrote:

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.”

Psalm 19:1-2 NLT

Study. It is a foundational spiritual discipline.

Next, **meditation** or we might call it contemplation.

Webster defines meditation “as an act of considering with attention.” And “Concentration on spiritual things as a private devotion. Remember God’s command to Joshua, it didn’t stop at study, He went on to say…

“8 …Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do.”

There are a lot of people who have studied a great deal, but study without contemplation can actually be detrimental. We must think about what we study. As Paul wrote to the Philippians:

8 And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. 9 Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:8-9 NLT

The Psalmist wrote:

148 I stay awake through the night,

thinking about your promise.

Psalm 119:148

I’ve had a lot of sleepless nights worrying about a baseball game, a motorcycle race, a day on the job, or even a difficult relationship. Next time you are wrestling around in bed struggling with anxiety. Take a small step and meditate on one of God’s promises. You may not get to sleep, but at least it seems like a biblical form of insomnia.

Or better yet you could practice the next discipline on the list, **prayer**. This is another one that we can think of as unproductive. You know, what good is tee practice when you have to face a major leaguer??

Philippians says it should be present in everything.

Prayer is defined as, an address to God in word or thought.

6 Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. 7 Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-8 NLT

In the context I am using prayer will help even if you don’t get the big hit. Because God’s peace will prevail in your heart, even if you strike out.

And maybe the strike out happened because of too much time focused on other things which brings us to the next area of discipline, **fasting**.

Fasting is defined as abstaining from something.

Sometimes people fast from food or drink, or sex, but you can fast from anything. What if you did a social media fast. Or a Netflix and Amazon prime fast? The concept is that by fasting, your body learns that it really doesn’t need whatever you are fasting from. After the fast, you become more grateful or in some cases get rid of the item altogether.

Jesus fasted.

4 Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River. He was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where he was tempted by the devil for forty days. Jesus ate nothing all that time and became very hungry.

Luke 4:1-2 NLT

Paul and Barnabas fasted.

23 Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church. With prayer and fasting, they turned the elders over to the care of the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Acts 14:23 NLT

Remember fasting is not about us gaining favor with God, it is about growing in our dependence on God. As the scriptures say:

8 It’s true that we can’t win God’s approval by what we eat. We don’t lose anything if we don’t eat it, and we don’t gain anything if we do.

1 Corinthians 8:8 NLT

Which leads me to one last detail that Jesus shared about fasting, when he said to the disciples:

16 “And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. 17 But when you fast, comb your hair[d] and wash your face. 18 Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Matthew 6:17-18 NLT

The reward from fasting is not favor with God or man, it is spiritual growth, because it is a spiritual discipline. And fasting is something that is very tied to the next fundamental on our list which is **simplicity**.

The definition of simplicity I will use is “being (or keeping) uncomplicated or uncompounded.

Sometimes hitters go through slumps because they make things more complicated than they really are. They may go to great lengths to fix something that doesn’t need to be fixed and compound their problems. This is where the expression “Too smart for his own good,” came from.

As Americans most of us have an abundance of things and our abundance has a tendency to compound or complicate the problems in our lives.

I think Ecclesiastes 4:6 states it well when it says:

“Better to have one handful with quietness

than two handfuls with hard work

and chasing the wind.”

Try to pinpoint the things in your life that are beneficial and hold on to them. And try to figure out where you are “chasing the wind,” and get rid of it.

As Paul wrote to Timothy:

6 Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. 7 After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can’t take anything with us when we leave it. 8 So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content.

9 But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.

1 Timothy 6:6-10 NLT

And Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

11 Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands, just as we instructed you before. 12 Then people who are not believers will respect the way you live, and you will not need to depend on others.

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 NLT

Simple lives are the best lives, no matter what our society tries to push on us. The world says live loud, try to get a million views on youtube, do everything you can to make yourself known. The life of a celebrity is the best! The world has it backwards.

God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. 28 God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. 29 As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

1 Corinthians 1:27-29 NLT

Discipline yourself in simplicity. This brings us to the last spiritual discipline for today. **Solitude**.

Solitude is defined as “The quality or state of being alone or remote from society.”

Even though Jesus lived in simplicity he still got a lot of views. So how did He deal with it?

Luke wrote that, “Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness.” (Luke 4:16)

Every one of us should find ways to get away with God. It is only when we take ourselves out of the equation, that we can truly know that God is in control. As David penned God’s words:

“Be still, and know that I am God!

I will be honored by every nation.

I will be honored throughout the world.”

Psalm 46:10 NLT

God’s got this even if when we take a break. He’s the manager. He is the one who decides when we get to go up to bat. So don’t be afraid to sit out a game or two to help yourself remember that He’s got the game strategy all under control. There is a time to be still and just rest in the fact that you are a child of God.

My hope today was not to overwhelm you. It would be overwhelming if I told you that tomorrow you were going to have to face Justin Verlander tomorrow. Or maybe if I told you that you were going to have to preach next week.

Today, it is my goal to encourage you to take little steps to discipline yourselves spiritually. God will put you up to bat when you’re ready.