

A  
SHORT  
GUIDE  
TO

# SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

How to Become  
a Healthy  
Christian

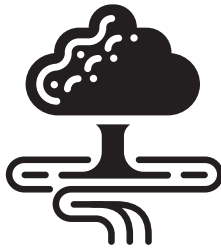


MASON KING

Foreword by  
JEN WILKIN

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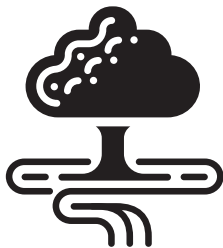




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MASON KING

**B&H**  
PUBLISHING  
BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

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Printed in the United States of America

978-1-0877-6848-9

Published by B&H Publishing Group  
Brentwood, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 248.84  
Subject Heading: CHRISTIAN LIFE \\  
SPIRITUAL LIFE \ DISCIPLESHIP

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Cover design and illustration by Matt Lehman.  
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# Dedication

Piper, Sheppard, and Posey

In life there will be plenty of distractions from God's good design. Root your loves in Christ, God's best given for you. This is the great work of your life, that you might become who He has made you to be and image His goodness to the world. Make your home next to the river of God's love.

I'm proud of you, and I will always love you  
more than you know.

Dad

---

Birdie,

I love you. I am more grateful every year for the life we have together. I have learned to love being loved by you.

MK

*How much are you willing to invest in yourself? People think they can look like giant oaks without putting down deep roots. When they realize how much effort it takes to put down deep roots, they settle for being bramble bushes. To be who you really are takes work, but it is good and rewarding work. “To be a human,” Augustine argues, “is to be the consistent, enduring subject of one’s deliberations and actions.” Anyone can rebel, and anyone can acquiesce, but it takes real effort to be a person. People often complain that they are not who they should be, but they take no action to change.*

—KLYNE R. SNODGRASS, *WHO GOD SAYS YOU ARE*

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# Foreword

I HAVE ENJOYED THE privilege of ministry partnership with my friend Mason King for the better part of ten years. I want to tell you a little of what friendship with Mason looks like. It looks like the spontaneous gift of an antique set of books by one of your favorite authors. It looks like your favorite dessert appearing at the end of a dinner in his home. It looks like an action figure of one of your heroes left as a surprise on your desk. It's a line of George Herbert poetry he knows will make you cry, or a paragraph from a commentary he knows will harmonize with what you're studying. You don't really remember when you told him you liked Dickens or cinnamon ice cream or poetry, or that you were studying atonement theory, but he remembers anyway. Because when he's with you, you have the best gift of all: his full attention.

I think being with Mason probably feels a lot like being with Jesus. Full focus, full investment. The feeling of being seen and known and valued. In an age of distractions and diversions,

## A SHORT GUIDE TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Mason King has chosen and followed quiet habits that anchor him in service to God and others. He has chosen patterns that free him to consider others more highly than himself. He has chosen the way of Jesus.

As I read the words of this book, I re-lived conversations we have shared about simplicity and self-awareness, about Sabbath, and long horizons of faithfulness, about the place of our feelings in relation to our faith, and about the shared burdens and joys of Christian community. I remembered sermons I have heard him preach that cut me to the heart with their gentle calls to holiness. And I remembered not merely his words, but the ways I have witnessed first-hand the fruit of these meditations in the life of a man who lives what he believes—fruit evident in his family, in his friendships, and in his church.

If you were friends with my friend, I can promise you he would anticipate what would bring you joy just as he has done for me and so many others. But even if you never know him personally, that is exactly what he is giving you in the pages of this book. A life patterned on the way of Jesus is a life of joyful discipline. What a gift to be reminded, “This is the way, walk in it.”

Jen Wilkin, author and Bible teacher

## Author's Note

EVERY NONFICTION BOOK GETS written because someone has a view they want to convince you is true. Here's mine, up front:

The triune God of the Bible is who He says He is, and what He says about you is true. Our culture tells us that truth is fluid, sin is fiction, and to hold a belief that contradicts someone else's feelings, experience, or interpretation of their life is unloving, intolerant, or small-minded.

We are rapidly reducing the beauty of being made in God's image to our own definition of comfort, pleasure, and self-fulfillment—which repeatedly fail to bring about the life offered by God.

You may wrestle with what level of change to expect in life. Looking at our own choices and those of Christians around us, I can understand. We live with overpromised or under-hoped-for expectations for the kind of change we can experience as Christians. At the same time, the world offers a compelling invitation to fulfill our desires outside of God's good design. It's easy

to choose comfort over character, especially if we're confused about who God is and who we're supposed to become.

The question we often ask is: "What am I supposed to do?"

The question we need to ask is: "What kind of person do I need to become?"

Spoiler alert: God isn't hiding the answer. Our culture has opted out of God's view of reality, so it takes work for us to see and live in His story. We value proven facts, predictable results, and short-term gains without long-term effort. We want decades of life change in weeks, and when quick results don't come, we move on to the next thing.

In our backyard there is an oak tree, full of years and character. Most mornings before the sun rises, before I begin my morning disciplines, I sit and study the tree out the living room window. I treasure these quiet moments, becoming present to God in a new day.

In the end I want my life to be as steady, strong, and noble as that tree. I want to offer an oak of righteousness to Jesus, a life daily nourished by God's living water as He works in me a heart surrendered to Him.

Friend, I want that for you. Oaks don't grow overnight; they take decades to mature. You and I have been invited to plant our

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

lives next to the river of God's love. This is our daily work, living with the end in mind.

My prayer is that our conversation will serve in this, the great work of your life. May you hear and respond to the call of becoming who God made you to be over a lifetime for His glory, your good, and the good of those around you.

Mason King



# Introduction

**NO ONE PICKS UP** a book on spiritual disciplines without an eye toward the future—the future Christian life they want to live, the future maturity level they might attain, the future version of themselves they want to be. If you’ve come to this book, it’s probably because you are thinking about your spiritual future. You want to change. You want to grow. You want to become a healthier Christian, and so do I! Before we get started, let me remind you of something my pastor regularly reminds our church: God is not waiting for a future version of you to love.

If you are a Christian, it can be easy to assume familiarity with Jesus. Who He is, what He has done, what He is doing and will do—check. When we do this, however, life with God quickly becomes stop this, do that, then you’ll be lovable.

We begin with faith, expect change, and are painfully aware of failure. We think trying harder will take care of the shame we feel for the things we just can’t quit. Frustrated with ourselves, we figure if God is real, He’s probably frustrated with us too. This is when we doubt God could love like we’ve been told.



Here's the thing: God is real, He can be trusted, and He loves *you*.

God doesn't tolerate you. God *loves* you. God loves *you*.

I struggled with this for years. I knew I was in God's family, but I hung out by the front door of the house. I was nervous that at some point I'd be found out and need to make a quick exit. It felt like God loved other people, but I was unworthy, too complicated, or was close to using up all my chances.

Jesus told his disciples: "As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you" (John 15:9).

Me? I know me. You must mean someone else. I can often focus on being a fallen sinner at the expense of believing I'm a beloved son. I know where I fail. I don't need a reminder.

How about you?

Are you willing to take God at His Word? Christ loves you, and it's not despite who you are. How you've made your way in the world so far won't keep you from Him. He *already* loves you and invites you to live life as He designed it to be.

God is not waiting for a future version of you to love **and He has a future version of you in mind.**

This future you is *you*, with all your gifts and character—renewed and transformed in the image of your Maker. It's not as if your gifts, character, and experience don't matter. Christ takes all of you and offers the opportunity to become fully human, as

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you and I are made to be. This is what spiritual disciplines are all about, really.

God works to restore in us the ability to delight in the true, the beautiful, and the good. He calls us to join Him in forming our character because we live in a world that is actively trying to *deform* us into its own image. We are invited to life with Him, full of purpose and meaning, laughter and deep joy.

As you consider what living a fully formed life in Christ might look like as you pursue spiritual disciplines, spend some time praying and answering the following questions. Write them down so you can refer back to them.

### **1. Who do you hope to become?**

What adjectives do you want others to use when they describe you in five years? (for example, disciplined, kind, generous)

### **2. Who are you becoming today?**

If who you are today is the product of the choices from all your yesterdays, who are you becoming right now? How would others describe you today if they watched your life over the last year?

**3. How do you think God describes you  
*right now?***

What do you tell yourself God thinks about you?

When you look at the whole of your answers to question 3, are they representative of the God of the Bible? Often this list shows us more about our sources of shame than our salvation.

What do you notice about your answers to questions 1 and 2? Are there any themes or patterns?

In being faced with the gap between who we want to be and who we're becoming, your response is important. One author helps us think about it like this:

There is no way forward unless we are willing to be displeasing to ourselves. . . . In other words, we will not change unless we are dissatisfied with who we are. If we are not willing to examine ourselves, be honest, and admit our shortcomings even when it hurts, we will never be who God calls us to be.<sup>1</sup>

*How do I become who God has made me to be?* How do I ensure that tomorrow's "me" is spiritually healthier than today's? That's the question we're setting out to answer in the pages that follow. And though the answer is not easy, it is simple: you

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become a healthier, truer, and more Christian you by not only understanding what a healthy life with God is but by disciplining yourself in three crucial areas in order to get there.

As you read, know that this book may feel different to you than typical spiritual discipline books that are filled with to-do lists. Practical ideas for spiritual development are indeed found within these pages, yes, but this book is not merely going to tell you to read your Bible and pray. It will *include* those disciplines, yes, but it is going to *offer* you much more. It's going to give you a fuller picture of what it means to have healthy spiritual habits—a picture of what life looks like when you discipline yourself to offer *all* of your life to God instead of just the minutes dedicated to prayer, evangelism, church attendance, Bible reading, and so on.

This work consists of two sections, and we'll cover the following in them:

### **SECTION I: A HEALTHY LIFE WITH GOD**

- What informs and influences how we think about God, ourselves, and our lives.
- Build perspective about who we're actually becoming and how God may be working to mind the gap between this and who God made us to be.

## SECTION II: THREE DIMENSIONS FOR A HEALTHY LIFE WITH GOD

The remainder of the book is an invitation to practice being present with God in three areas of daily life. The categories are purposefully broad, and in each we explore a set of disciplines to help you sow toward your future self. These practices aid us in becoming the kind of person that, over time (and through grace), increasingly displays the fruit of the Spirit. These three dimensions are:

- Our *attention*, the most precious commodity we have. Who you are today is built on where your attention went yesterday. If you want a future self that is healthier in Christ than you are today, then disciplining your attention is nonnegotiable.
- Our *emotions*. God created emotions, and Jesus experienced and stewarded every emotion perfectly in the flesh. He showed us how to manage, and not be managed by, emotions. If you discipline yourself to give your emotional life to God on a regular basis as Jesus did, the you of tomorrow will be more like Christ.

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- Our *limits*. We have a Creator, and we are not that Creator, yet often we view our limits as obstacles instead of as mercies. The life of self-sufficiency is a repeated declaration of independence from God, and this is not the call of the Christian. If you want to get healthier as a Christian, you'll need to get disciplined in the way you embrace the boundaries of your creaturehood.<sup>2</sup>

As I said before, these three categories—*attention*, *emotions*, and *limits*—are purposefully broad. The suggested disciplines within each are starting points for training in godliness, not checklists to accomplish. These disciplines orient us first to God, then to ourselves, and finally outward to others. The order is important here. Plenty of best-selling advice for the good life misses the first and third steps, directing you toward yourself—and yourself *only*—as the origin and object of change.

God knows what we need, and He has provided for us in Jesus. Through the Bible, God invites you to an eternal quality of life, the life you are designed to live. He invites you to know, love, trust, and obey Jesus, to be renewed in the image of your Maker. No hidden agenda, no scam, no other shoe waiting to drop. You can trust God, both for now and for who He has called you to become.

## A SHORT GUIDE TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

When faced with who they want to be and who they are actually becoming, many Christians feel shame thinking they should be further along by now.

These shame-filled accusations can take different, but similar, forms:

*“Look at them. They’re near your age but are so much more godly than you—what happened?”*

*“You’re not lovable. Just look at the choices you’ve made. Grace is for other people.”*

*“You’re twenty years into life with Christ and still struggling with the same cycles of sin. God has to be disappointed with the mess you’ve made of your life.”*

When I hear these accusations, the parable of the workers in the vineyard is an encouragement to my heart. Jesus has been teaching about how the first will be last, and then disciples start arguing about who will be the greatest among them. A few even get their mom involved to ask Jesus for special treatment, and He responds:

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them*

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into his vineyard for the day. When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He said to them, 'You also go into my vineyard, and I'll give you whatever is right.' So off they went. About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing. Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?'

"'Because no one hired us,' they said to him.

"'You also go into my vineyard,' he told them. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, 'Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.'

"When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: 'These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day's work and the burning heat.'



“He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius? Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I’m generous?’

“So the last will be first, and the first last.”  
(Matt. 20:1–16)

We compare ourselves to others; we create standards of perfection Superman couldn’t reach, and we believe we’re no good when we fail.

**Jesus sets the standard of relationship at His generosity, not your maturity.**

We are all an ongoing process of change until the day we die.<sup>3</sup> In the end, the beauty we’re wanting, the lightness and joy we long for are found not in an idea or a habit but in a Person. I remind myself often that waking up in a new day is an invitation to begin again in dependence on the kindness of God, ordering my life in hopes of being present with Him.

Now let’s take those questions you answered and consider our need to be reoriented to God’s reality, live into God’s design, and order life under God’s wisdom.

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Are you ready to learn more about God's desires for what a healthy you looks like? To grow in grace by surrendering all of life to God's good design over our attention, emotions, and limits? Let's begin.



## SECTION I

# A Healthy Life with God

*“If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully the thing I want to live for. Between these two answers, you can determine the identity of any person. The better answer he has, the more of a person he is.”<sup>1</sup>*

—THOMAS MERTON

## WE ALL WANT TO GROW INTO THE PERSON GOD MADE US TO BE—INTO A MORE SPIRITUALLY MATURE VERSION OF OURSELVES.

But how does a sapling with good intentions actually become an oak of righteousness? You might think the answer is: “regularly read the Bible, pray often, and share the gospel consistently.” And those practices are certainly part of it. But in this book, Mason King expands your thinking **beyond basic spiritual practices** (which typically emphasize what you must do) **into a more holistic picture** of what a full and flourishing life with God can look like (focusing instead on who you might *become*).

In these pages, learn how you can become a vibrant, healthy Christian by regularly offering to God three main dimensions of your life—**your attention, your emotions, and your limits**—for when you are disciplined in cultivating these environments at the root, you will grow into the right kind of tree.

**MASON KING** serves the executive director of The Village Church Institute, Leadership, and Groups in Flower Mound, Texas. He is currently completing a PhD in church history from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. King holds a DMin in executive leadership from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a master of theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary, and a BA in speech communication from Texas A&M. Mason is married to Carly and they have three children.

RELIGION / Christian Living / Spiritual Growth  
978-1-0877-6848-9 \$14.99 USD



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