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Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991. 254 pp. \$14.00.

Donald Whitney has given the saints of the Lord Jesus Christ an invaluable gift by writing the subject of this review. Of all the assignments that I have been given since the start of my seminary education, I consider the reading of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* to be in the top three most educational and life-changing. If the people of God still had an earthly, human king to lead and govern them and I were that king, I would require *every* person to read annually this work of Whitney. I hope to accomplish three objectives in this atypical book review: suggest and validate the reasons why Whitney's book is so insightful, practical, and, therefore, helpful; provide and briefly discuss some examples from the text that found my aforementioned compliments; share some ways that Whitney's advice has already enhanced my relationship with the Lord.

Many Christians today rightly laud the theological works of John Piper and John MacArthur, Jr. Are these men naturally smarter or more gifted than most other contemporary Christian authors? Where did they acquire the depth and color with which they write? Where did they learn to relate to their readers with such accuracy? They, like all godly men and women, no doubt spent (and continue to spend) many hours poring over God's Word. But they did not stop with that which the Lord enabled them to mine from the Scriptures. In humility, recognizing that God has given many fine Bible expositors to the church, they placed themselves at the feet of spiritual giants like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, George Whitefield, John Calvin, and Richard Baxter. Whitney has done the same. Because of highly

gifted men of the past and present, Whitney's "life and ministry are immeasurably better" (11). The same can be said of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.

Adapting a statement by Professor William Cutrer's favorite seminary professor, Howard Hendricks, Whitney has "trafficked in the truths that he preaches," and they have proven to be effective at promoting godliness. His personal testimonies also lend credibility to the book, making its readers more likely to implement his suggestions.

The manner in which something is presented, be it a gift in a box or thoughts on paper or a prospective employee in his or her attire, is as important as the thing being given, expressed, or considered. The structure of Whitney's book as well as each chapter that comprises it is weighted appropriately and written logically. "No Spiritual Discipline is more important than the intake of God's Word," (28) hence the reason the first two chapters are spent addressing the Christian's need to hear, read, study, memorize, meditate on, and apply it. The foundation of the Christian faith and its practices, including the disciplines that enable one to become like his or her Lord, is the Word of God. The flow of each chapter reminds me of that in many New Testament epistles—instruction, exhortation, and application. More Christian authors would do well to emulate God's manner of communicating by letter to His people. Whitney also demonstrates the interdependence of the spiritual disciplines. For example, "there should be a smooth, almost unnoticeable transition between Scripture input and prayer output so that we move even closer to God in those moments. This happens when there is the link of meditation in between" (71). If a Christian fails to eat God's Word, he or she will not produce sanctified prayers because he or she, including his or her requests and praises to God, will not be sanctified. See John 17:17.

I have a close friend and brother in Christ who lives in Dallas, Texas. While discussing Whitney's book a few weeks ago, he told me that he once used it to teach a Sunday school class.

This did not surprise me, since the book is replete with Scripture. References, quotations, and even verse interpretations from fifty of the sixty-six books of the Bible are used to authorize Whitney's instruction, admonition, and exhortation. True Christians need more than prooftexts. The top scholars of the world's largest Christian cults frequently adduce prooftexts from the Bible. But few actually devote much space in their written propaganda to the exegesis of those texts. Three examples of Whitney's practice of passage exposition and commentary are present on pages thirty-five and thirty-six. Here he "looks at three examples of a heart to study the Word of God" (35)—Ezra 7:10, Acts 17:11, 2 Timothy 4:13.

Leaders will always be readers. By reading *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* alone, it is quite evident that Whitney has been exposed to a broad spectrum of literary works. This enabled him to add color and spice to the book. Excerpts from some of his reads have been used to provide captivating negative and positive illustrations or to reinforce a point. William Barclay's story of Coleridge (22) reminds me of many gifted Christians who, due to indiscipline, do not accomplish much for the kingdom of God. Sad. A portion of Anton Chekhov's "The Bet" (182-183) completely arrested my mind as I began Whitney's chapter on silence and solitude. Perhaps the most personal and mouth-watering illustration that Whitney provided from his own life is found in the chapter on evangelism. To emphasize the apostle Paul's teaching that Christians are "the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing," (105) Whitney likens the "power of Godliness" (105) in a believer to the alluring smell of seasoned beef and pork emanating from "a barbecue restaurant on Highway 71, just north of Caffy's [Whitney's wife] hometown of Springdale, Arkansas" (105). I was reared in Bentonville, Arkansas, which is about twenty minutes north of Springdale. I studied at a university in Fayetteville, Arkansas, which is adjacent to Springdale's southern border. And I attended church

in Springdale from 1993 to 1997. I happily witnessed the “message” of Hobo Joe’s (the restaurant that Whitney does not name) hundreds of times. (I even had dinner there once!) Believe me; it is indeed a fragrant aroma.

Many theologians today are verbose, making their books boring and burdensome to read. Whitney’s clear, concise, direct writing style makes his book efficient and enjoyable to read. Only three words or phrases drove me to my dictionary: “tinctured” on page forty-eight, “navel gazing” on page 207, and “trenchant” on page 243. Why do writers, especially theologians, think they must dress up their language with lofty terminology and complicated grammar? The most sophisticated verbiage we may use to convey thought does not impress the Almighty and often obscures the message to be received. Pardon the soapbox. “Learning and following involve discipline, for those who only learn accidentally and follow incidentally are not true disciples” (20). “Every believer must realize that it is sinful not to seek ways to spread the message about our Lord Jesus” (112). “I think the ‘prosperity theology’ popular today is heresy” (153). Life is too short and eternity is too long to circumlocute when considering spiritual things. If a spade is a spade, name it for what it is.

Although I strongly agree with Conrad Murrell that modern America is “hee hawing itself to hell” (see Eccl 7:4), I also strongly believe that humor has a place in the ministry of Christians, including the church house (e.g., white guys trying to rap). Whitney reminds Christians in his chapter on prayer that God has a VLE—Very Large Ear—meaning He is always ready and able to hear the prayers of His children. This funny acronym, which he took from the acronym for a scientific apparatus and tweaked, has stuck in my head since reading it. His humor made a point of the chapter more memorable. The same is true about a statement he made in his

chapter on worship. “Imagine one of the creatures worshipping around the throne of God saying, ‘I’m tired of this!’” (97). The thought is so ridiculous that it evokes laughter.

I have learned in my life that the best teachers are successful, at least in part, because they ask penetrating questions of their students. Well-worded questions usually facilitate deep reflection which usually precedes conviction for a Christian. Whitney’s questions seek to move the content of his message from the head/heart to the hand. “So the question is not, ‘How much of my money should I give to God?’ but rather, ‘How much of God’s money should I keep for myself?’” (141). Wow. Whitney asks fifteen piercing questions while considering the discipline of journaling by quoting from George Whitefield’s *Diary*. See page 215.

I have an electronic prayer list. The supplications are arranged in chronological order with a blank cell next to each so that I can note how God chose to answer my prayer. Before reading *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, I seldom accessed and prayed through it. Whitney’s quotation of Asaph in Psalm 77 prompted me to start using it again so that I might “remember the deeds of the LORD” and “consider all His mighty deeds” (Ps 77:11a and 12b, NASB).

Whitney is correct in saying that “God’s purpose in giving you that gift [your spiritual gift] is for you to serve with it for His Kingdom” (124). My mom, who often selflessly serves me, is currently reading Walt Chantry’s *Today’s Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic*. Once she completes it, I plan to serve her and my step-dad by reading and discussing *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* with them so that they might learn to be more disciplined for the purpose of godliness. “As each one has received a special gift [I believe mine is teaching and evangelism], employ it in serving one another [my parents] as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet 4:10, NASB).