

# Building Well: A Framework for Spiritual Practices

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“Make every effort to add to your faith goodness... knowledge... self-control...  
perseverance... godliness... mutual affection... love.”

(2 Peter 1:5-7, TNIV)



## Intentionality in Christian Growth

Christian growth—advancing from one step to another—is not automatic, nor is it driven by mysterious external forces. Each Christian is called personally to join God in the process. Prefacing the description of the eight-step progression for Christian growth introduced in 2 Peter 1 is the admonition that we “make every effort” (v. 5). In fact this is only the first of several directives in this chapter that instruct us to assert energy toward spiritual growth. We are directed to “be all the more diligent” and to “practice” in the pursuit of these qualities (v. 10, ESV).

If our insight, perspective, effectiveness, and fruitfulness as Christians all rest upon intentional engagement on our part, we must ask: in what kinds of activities should we invest ourselves if we wish to become agape people—people embodying the final stage of growth according to Peter’s paradigm? This question has been answered in many different ways over the history of the church, resulting in the development of a wide variety of spiritual practices, disciplines, and even retreats.... Let’s take a moment to consider a framework of two preludes and two postludes designed to enhance the experience of these practices and cement their effectiveness over time.

## Two Preludes

### Prelude 1: Prepare a Place

The Psalmist demonstrates that setting and timing are essential to fruitful interaction with God in the introduction to Psalm 32: “Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters they shall not reach him” (Psalm 32:6). There is a time and place conducive to finding and listening to God, and it is not in the midst of clutter and activity.

One of the greatest detriments to a consistent prayer life in our culture is the challenge of working a time and place for prayer into an already cluttered daily routine. Virtually all spiritual practices require uninterrupted time, which means that the first step toward productive time with God is planning. Many of us use smart-phones and computer-based planning software to schedule our work and home lives. These same tools can be used to carve out time for meditation on scripture.

As you set time aside, think also about the place. Find somewhere you will be uninterrupted by family and friends, and undistracted by household, social, or business tasks. For most practices, plan to have a Bible, a journal, and a pen with you. Laptops, tablets, and smartphones can be very difficult to resist, so leave them behind. If your only Bible is the one on your smart phone, get a compact printed Bible that you can use for meditation. Some people find it easy to practice spiritual disciplines at home; others find that a coffee shop, an empty sanctuary, or a park bench works better. Experiment with your setting and when you find something that works well turn it into a routine. Here are the basic criteria:

- Comfortable, but not so comfortable that you struggle to stay awake and focused...
- Free from distractions, but not so silent that you can hear the lights buzz.
- Beauty is good. Find someplace you like to be and that inspires you on some level.

### Prelude 2: Center Down

In the stream of Christianity I come from, it is common to gather before the beginning of a service or event and pray for the Lord’s blessing and presence. The first thing that happens in this kind of prayer is... nothing. The group gets together, joins hands, and, before anyone says anything, there is a significant moment of silent waiting. Though it seems like mere silence, what happens in this space is crucial. We are silencing the chatter of our hearts and minds and are intentionally redirecting our focus toward the fact of God’s ever-presence. This moment is indispensable for genuine prayer. In the Quaker tradition, this is referred to as “centering down.”<sup>1</sup> In this brief moment of silent reflection, we pause to allow our human spirits to “connect” with God’s spirit, making the prayer that follows truly and deeply spiritual.

In private devotions, to miss this connection does not mean that God does not hear our prayers and cannot answer them. He knows our thoughts before we speak them and is attentive to us in every moment of life (Psalm 139:1-18). It does mean, however, that our sensitivity to God’s presence is significantly diminished and we may in turn miss something that God desires to say to us—or miss the refreshment and life that God desires to breathe into our spiritual practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster. *Celebration of Discipline*. rev. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 30.

## Two Postludes

### Postlude 1: Reflect with Others

When we seek to listen to God's voice, what we discern is sometimes mixed with other voices: echoes of our parents' affirmations or criticisms; what we were taught in school; the book we are reading; or advice from our friends. The New Testament teaches the need for good judgment in situations like this. We should test messages that seem to come from the Holy Spirit, embracing what is truly good and rejecting whatever is potentially harmful (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22). But how do we gain the perspective we need to know the difference? Christian friends who know you can be indispensable resources in these situations, as the wisdom needed to take the right kind of action comes through thoughtful consultation with experienced and trusted people (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 24:6). Cultivate friendships in Christ, prayer-partner relationships, or small accountability groups. They will add insight, relevance, and beauty to your devotional life and will help you apply well what the Spirit speaks to you.

### Postlude 2: Put Feet to It

The Apostle James challenges Christians to "receive with meekness the implanted word" (James 1:21), then offers the analogy of the mirror. I like the way that the translation called "The Voice" renders this passage:

"If some fail to do what God requires, it's as if they forget the word as soon as they hear it. One minute they look in the mirror, and the next they forget who they are and what they look like. However, it is possible to open your eyes and take in the beautiful, perfect truth found in God's law of liberty and live by it. If you pursue that path and actually do what God has commanded, then you will avoid the many distractions that lead to an amnesia of all true things and you will be blessed" (James 1:23-25, The Voice).

It is clearly possible to sit before the word of God and receive deep spiritual insight and self-knowledge directly from the Spirit—and then to do nothing about it! Application and change are essential aspects of genuine listening. The habit of listening without responding results in patterns of hypocrisy and spiritual death, rather than in the life that can come by real-world application of what God speaks into our lives.