

REVISED & EXPANDED

CHARLES F. STANLEY BIBLE STUDY SERIES



PRACTICING BASIC SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

FOLLOW GOD'S BLUEPRINT FOR LIVING



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CHARLES F. STANLEY



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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INTRODUCTION

OUR BLUEPRINT FOR STRENGTH

Every building begins with a blueprint. If the engineering is faulty on the blueprint, the resulting structure will be weak. The same is true when it comes to our spiritual lives. The strength of our faith in Christ rests first and foremost on the absolute reliability and truth of God's Word.

Thank God that we have a blueprint for spiritual strength that does not fail! We can rely on the Bible as our blueprint for living with *complete confidence*. It gives us God's truth and tells us how to apply that truth. It is a book of genuine wisdom about how to become strong spiritually . . . and how to stay that way. Just as builders return to blueprints often during the construction of a structure, so we must return to the Bible often during the development of our spiritual lives. As we do, we make certain we are staying on track in our spiritual growth.

This book can be used by you alone or by several people in a small-group study. At various times, you will be asked to relate to the material in one of the following four ways.

First, what new insights have you gained? Make notes about the insights you have. You may want to record them in your Bible or in a separate journal. As you reflect on your new understanding, you are likely to see how God has moved in your life.

Second, have you ever had a similar experience? You approach the Bible from your own unique background . . . your own particular set

of understandings about the world that you bring with you when you open God's Word. For this reason, it is important to consider how your experiences are shaping your understanding and allow yourself to be open to the truth that God reveals.

Third, how do you feel about the material? While you should not depend solely on your emotions as a gauge for your faith, it is important for you to be aware of them as you study a passage of Scripture and can freely express them to God. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit will use your emotions to compel you to look at your life in a different or challenging way.

Fourth, in what way do you feel challenged to respond or to act? God's Word may inspire you or challenge you to take a particular action. Take this challenge seriously and find ways to move into it. If God reveals a particular need that He wants you to address, take that as His "marching orders." God will empower you to do something with the challenge that He has just given you.

Start your Bible study sessions in prayer. Ask God to give you spiritual eyes to see and spiritual ears to hear. As you conclude your study, ask the Lord to seal what you have learned so you will not forget it. Ask Him to help you grow into the fullness of the nature and character of Christ Jesus.

I encourage you to keep the Bible at the center of your study. A genuine Bible study stays focused on God's Word and promotes a growing faith and a closer walk with the Holy Spirit in each person who participates.

LESSON 1



PREPARING FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

IN THIS LESSON

Learning: How do I prepare myself to grow spiritually?

Growing: What steps can I take to examine myself before I seek to grow in the spiritual disciplines?

Do you know what all children have in common, regardless of what differences there may be in terms of culture, time, and geography? The answer is *growth*. It doesn't matter where children are or what age they are—they all grow. In fact, lack of growth is one of the ways that doctors know something is wrong with a child in terms of his or her development.

The same is true for children of God. When we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, our lives should be marked by spiritual growth from that moment forward. The apostle Paul said that we will no longer live as spiritual children but will “grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). In the same manner, Peter commanded Christians to “desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2).

To live as a Christian means to grow spiritually each day so we move closer to Christ with every season of our lives. Spiritual growth is a natural process for every follower of Christ. Of course, we know that things don’t always go as they *should* go. Sometimes things get off kilter. This can certainly happen with our spiritual lives.

So, what should we do when we encounter seasons where our spiritual growth seems stunted or stagnant? How should we respond when we don’t appear to be growing closer to Jesus in our lives—when those old patterns and old habits keep popping up? What should we do when it feels we have lost all our spiritual momentum?

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Spiritual disciplines are one of the biggest factors that contribute to spiritual growth. Think about this in terms of new believers. When people come to Christ, they tend to grow quickly (and noticeably) in their spiritual lives because they start spending time in the Word of God, praying, attending church, and connecting with other believers. This growth comes about because they are engaging in these spiritual disciplines.

In this study, we will explore basic spiritual disciplines because they are critical not only for new Christians but also for *everyone* who chooses to follow Christ. In the sessions to come, we will explore how to strengthen personal study of Scripture, how to give faithfully, what it means to connect with God, and more. We will examine these

core spiritual disciplines and how they apply to our lives—regardless of our level of experience as followers of Christ.

However, I want to start in this lesson by exploring something different. I have found it is possible for Christians to practice the spiritual disciplines and not experience growth because they are just going through the motions. Our hearts must be connected to our actions. So, we first need to examine our spiritual lives in a meaningful way. More accurately, we need to ask *God* to examine our hearts and reveal anything that may be blocking our spiritual growth.

I know from experience this process requires effort on our part. But I promise it will be worth it. When we work with God to examine our spiritual lives, we gain a keen sense of what we need to do to move forward and to mature spiritually the way the Lord intended. We will then be ready to supercharge that growth by practicing the basic spiritual disciplines.

1. Are you currently in a season of spiritual growth or spiritual stagnation? Explain.

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2. What are you hoping to learn or experience throughout this study? Why?

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ALLOW GOD TO EXAMINE YOUR HEART

Psalms 139 has long been recognized as one of David's most beautiful psalms. It's a work of art, and it begins with a poignant reality: "O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways" (verses 1-3).

David started this magnificent poem by acknowledging that God knew him inside and out. There wasn't a thought or an action in David's life that God did not see and understand. Of course, the same is true for us as followers of Jesus today. God knows everything about us. He is all-knowing. This knowledge penetrates even to the most personal aspects of our lives.

That being the case, the final two verses of Psalm 139 are especially interesting: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; and see if *there is any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (verses 23-24). David was requesting a personal encounter with God. He was saying, "*Lord, I want you to scan my life. I'm ready for some spiritual surgery. Help me see myself the way You see me. Leave nothing unexposed.*"

David intended this examination to cover his entire life. He wanted God to "search" both his actions and his attitudes. He wanted God to test his heart—his "anxieties." He wanted God to highlight anything that might be "wicked" inside him. He desired God to lead him "in the way everlasting." In other words, he wanted to continue growing spiritually. He wanted to truly know himself so he could make significant progress in connecting more deeply with God.

This is a crucial step for all Christians. If we want to experience spiritual growth—especially if we want to maximize our growth through the spiritual disciplines—we need to get an accurate picture of our spiritual lives. We need to pray, "*Lord, look at me through the lens of Your all-knowing eyes. Show me anything that doesn't belong in my life.*"

Show me anything that is preventing me from growing in my spiritual relationship with You.”

3. What do you like best about David’s request in Psalm 139?

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4. What emotions do you experience when you think about asking God to examine or evaluate your life?

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BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

Asking God to examine and evaluate us in this manner will require a lot from us. It is not just wishful thinking. It will require us first and foremost to be willing to look inside our own minds and our own hearts—even if we don’t like what we find there. It will require *honesty*. We need to be honest with ourselves if we want to gain anything from the experience.

Why is this? Because it is easy to blame others for our faults or the different ways we go astray. It is easy for us to say, “God, there may be a problem here, but You need to understand it is not my fault. This person did this to me when I was young—or that person did that to me when I was older—and that is why I do the things I do.”

Remember the first thing David emphasized in Psalm 139: *God’s omniscience*. The Lord knows all things, which means He knows everything about us. Because this is true, there is simply no use in trying to hide from God or deflect the truth about our own hearts. He already knows. We cannot fool Him. When we are dishonest about what the Holy Spirit reveals, we don’t have a shot at fixing things. We don’t have a chance of getting better.

5. When has God revealed something uncomfortable to you about yourself? What happened next?

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6. What obstacles tend to prevent you from being honest about your own life?

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REALIZE THE PROCESS INVOLVES TIME

The process of examining ourselves—of asking God to search us and reveal what He finds—is a *process*. It is not something that just happens in a moment and is done. It requires time. The reason is because God loves us enough to not expose the reality of who we are in one moment.

If most people were to get an accurate view of the lives they have led and who they really are inside, it would be so distasteful, hurtful, and painful to them that they could hardly stand it. Instead of helping them, the revelation would be so terrible that it might compel them to turn to alcohol, drugs, or other unhealthy behaviors to bury the pain.

It takes time to really know yourself. Consider this: you didn't grow up overnight. Every single day of your life has added something to who you are. Every day has added to the emotions you have experienced, the thoughts you have entertained, and the choices you have made. So, when you ask God to reveal who you truly are, He starts slowly. He gives you a little bit at first—something you can handle. Then, over time, He reveals more and more. He goes deeper and deeper until He brings you to a place where you are ready and able to move forward.

I am sure that you have experienced tremendous hurt in your life. You have gone through pain, rejection, loss, unforgiveness, bitterness, resentment, and hostility. Maybe all at the same time. You have been hurt in many different ways. Therefore, God takes it slowly when it comes to revealing the sources and the consequences of that hurt. He peels things away one layer at a time so you are not overwhelmed by everything being exposed at once.

David said, “Try me, and know my anxieties” (Psalm 139:23). It won't happen quickly. So, as you prepare to examine yourself, be ready to invest as much time as God requires to help you get an accurate picture of where you are and where you need to go.

7. How much time do you give to God in prayer during a given day?
In a given week?

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8. Where can you set aside time this week specifically for this process of examining yourself through God’s eyes?

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BE COURAGEOUS

Let me remind you of the case I am making in this lesson. Namely, you will never be the person God wants you to be until you let Him show you the person you are. It doesn’t matter how methodically or mechanically you practice the spiritual disciplines. You first need to get an accurate picture of yourself before those disciplines will accomplish anything in your life.

Take it from me . . . that will require courage. There was a time in my life when everything seemed good. I was a young pastor with a young family. On the outside, everything was working well. However, on the inside, I knew something wasn’t right. I wasn’t experiencing my connection with God the way I was used to experiencing it.

I wasn't growing spiritually the way that I wanted to grow. There was a problem, but I didn't know what it was.

So, I prayed a prayer like the one David recorded in Psalm 139. "*Lord, show me what's wrong. Show me what's blocking my connection with You.*" In response, God opened my eyes to see a part of my heart I had never fully considered—and it scared me. It made me want to clam up and not go any farther down that road of self-examination.

Specifically, God showed me the poison I had allowed into my life because of bitterness against my stepfather. My father died when I was nine months old, and my mother did not remarry until I was nine years old. When she did remarry, there was a lot of conflict between my stepfather and me. Lots of tension. I felt he was unkind and ugly toward my mother. It created a lot of resentment and hostility in my heart toward him.

When God revealed this to me, I chose not to do anything about it for several months. I put the whole thing out of my mind . . . or at least I attempted to do so. But every time I would take my place behind the pulpit to preach, it was as if I could see my stepfather sitting right there in the front row. I could not escape what God had showed to me.

So, eventually, I went to see my stepfather. When I sat down across a table from him, I told him openly and honestly what God had revealed. I spoke about what I felt and why I felt it. I then did something that required courage: I asked my stepfather to forgive me for the bitterness, anger, resentment, and hostility I had stored up inside my heart for all those years.

Now, this did not mean that I accepted everything that he had done in the past. Nor did it mean I was condoning his actions for all those years growing up. No, I simply apologized for what I had allowed into my heart—my thoughts and my emotions I had stored up against him.

When I walked out of his house, it was as if God had pulled the plug on the emotional blockage inside me. And not just an emotional

blockage—but a spiritual blockage as well. In fact, I can look back on that time and see it was after that moment I began to grow and connect with God in a way I had never before experienced. My understanding of God and my relationship with Him increased dramatically, and God began to do things in my life and through my life that I had never dreamed were possible.

So, I want to tell you that truly examining yourself will require courage. It will not be easy. But it will be worth it. The rewards will be incredible, because you will grow spiritually. It will be the key to unlocking a more intimate connection with God—and it will be a critical step in maximizing everything God wants you to experience through the spiritual disciplines.

9. Do you consider yourself to be a person of courage? Why or why not?

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10. What are you most afraid of discovering if you examine yourself the way David described?

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TODAY AND TOMORROW

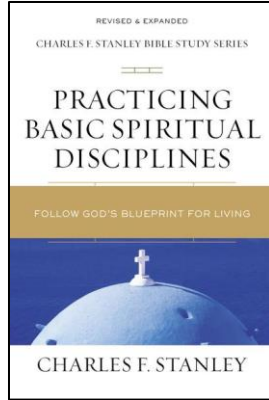
Today: I will not become the person God created me to be until I truly understand who I am now.

Tomorrow: I will examine myself with honesty and courage so that I can experience true spiritual growth.

CLOSING PRAYER

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Father, how grateful we are that Your love never changes. It is not prejudiced. It is not forgetful. It is always the same. You are always ready to hear our confession and the cry of our hearts. Today, we ask that You would examine our hearts. Look at us through the lens of Your all-knowing eyes. Reveal anything that is unhealthy that does not belong there. We are willing to change, and we thank You for revealing Your truths to us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



PRACTICING BASIC SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

by Charles F. Stanley

What spiritual disciplines do you follow to help you grow closer to God?

In *Practicing Basic Spiritual Disciplines*, you will examine several such practices that will help you mature in Christ and develop a consistent and unwavering walk of faith. Ultimately, these practices will lead to you becoming more like the Savior! You will learn how to develop these disciplines that build "spiritual muscle," learn the ten hallmarks of spiritual strength, and discover the signs of spiritual growth. Most important, you will learn about the character of God.

The **Charles F. Stanley Bible Study Series** is a unique approach to Bible study, incorporating biblical truth, personal insights, emotional responses, and a call to action. Each study draws on Dr. Stanley's many years of teaching the guiding principles found in God's Word, showing how we can apply them in practical ways to every situation we face. This edition of the series has been completely revised and updated, and includes two brand-new lessons from Dr. Stanley.

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