

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

## Understanding How God Changes Lives

by  
Dallas Willard\*

### THE SECRET OF THE EASY YOKE

1. How do you think people change? If you asked the average churchgoer how we become people of love, joy, and peace, what do you think that person would say?
2. The “hard yoke” might be defined as trying to do the good (and spectacular) things Jesus did. What, in Dallas Willard’s view, is the easy yoke?

---

\* Discussion Guide by Jan Johnson

## MAKING THEOLOGY OF THE DISCIPLINES PRACTICAL

1. What do you find interesting, attractive, or perhaps objectionable about the idea that we can become like Christ not by “constant and grinding effort, but with the ease and power he had—flowing from the inner depths, acting with quiet force from the innermost mind and soul of the Christ who has become a real part of us” (p. 14)?
2. Think of people you know who seek to experience the presence of God. Is this their experience: “participation in the life of God’s kingdom and in the vivid companionship of Christ . . . through appropriate exercise in the disciplines for life in the spirit” (p. 26)? If so, what disciplines do they use? If not, what do they do to seek to live in the presence of God?

## SALVATION IS A LIFE

1. How might the average person or churchgoer define “spirituality”? How do typical definitions of spirituality differ from Dallas’s statement that it is not inward only, but “a relationship of our embodied selves to God that has the natural and irrepressible effect of making us alive to the Kingdom of God—here and now in the material world” (p. 31)?
2. While many people think of salvation as only forgiveness of sins (going to heaven when you die), Dallas says

that to be saved is to have a “new [and different] order of life” (pp. 32, 37). What does he mean by that? What feelings do you experience upon hearing the idea that Christ gives you “newness of life” and that “God made us alive together in Christ” (Eph. 2:5)? How is this really good news (gospel)?

3. Redemption is more than getting out of a bad situation; it is the imparting to us of a new life, a “life of the same quality as Christ’s, because it indeed is Christ’s. He really does live on in us. The incarnation continues” (p. 38). What does God’s giving us this Christ-life tell us about what God is like and how God thinks of us and relates to us?

### “LITTLE LESS THAN A GOD”

1. The original job description for humanity (to be fruitful, multiply, and master the earth, Gen. 1:28) hints that humans once had a power beyond what we now possess. What thoughts and feelings arise within you at the idea that “men and women were designed by God, in the very constitution of their human personalities, to carry out [God’s] rule by meshing the relatively little power resident in their own bodies with the power inherent in the infinite Rule or Kingdom of God” (p. 54)? What, if anything, does this make you want to say to God?

## THE NATURE OF LIFE

1. Why is life now deformed? What is the cause of our “spiritual starvation” (p. 63)?
2. What do you think of the ideas that spirituality is a “matter of *another reality*” (p. 67) and that we humans can work in harmony with spiritual realities today even as Adam and Eve at first “function[ed] in harmony with that spiritual reality” (p. 66)?
3. How does practicing spiritual disciplines address what Ruskin called the “false life” of doing and saying things we don’t mean (pp. 59, 68)?
4. When, if ever, have you experienced this: we can “more and more live in a power that is, strictly speaking, beyond us” (p. 68)? Share an example of your experience.
5. What surprises, startles, or delights you about Peter’s journey of transformation (pp. 70–74)?

## SPIRITUAL LIFE: THE BODY’S FULFILLMENT

1. How does the fulfillment of the body (“interaction of our powers as bodily beings with God and his Kingdom,” p. 76) answer the problems of the deformed life in spiritual starvation (p. 63)?
2. If we are to live in “constant union” with God in daily life, we need to “lead our lives before God in an *open*,

*adventurous*, and *reflective* manner” (p. 78; italics added). Which of these three approaches would be the most stretching, and perhaps interesting, to you?

3. If we're to make our bodies part of our redemption process, it would help us to consider how “emotions and feelings inhabit distinct parts of our bodies: face, stomach, genitals, legs, arms, heart, shoulders” (p. 83). Pick a body part and describe what emotion or feeling inhabits it. For example, the shoulders are often inhabited by worry or hostility. How might we experiment with letting a more desired emotion inhabit that body part? Perhaps, as in our shoulder example, relaxing the shoulders may help us be less guarded. How would this exercise redeem our shoulders (and, indeed, our whole selves) so that we are less dominated by worry or hostility but more free to relax and love others?
4. How is the term “spiritual disciplines” defined in this chapter? How do spiritual disciplines help in the conflict between flesh and spirit (p. 86)?

## ST. PAUL'S PSYCHOLOGY OF REDEMPTION—THE EXAMPLE

1. What did “exercise unto godliness” look like in Paul's world (p. 98)? How does such “bodily training” contrast with today's focus on “doing what feels good” (even in church services)?
2. What is your response to the idea that Jesus's forty days of solitude, silence, and fasting strengthened him to

face temptation instead of making him weak? Do you think the Holy Spirit would lead Jesus to the worst possible situation for temptation, or to the best possible circumstance (Luke 4:1)?

3. Dallas says that Paul followed Jesus by living as Jesus lived—a life of solitude, fasting, prayer, study, self-sacrifice, simplicity, and frugality. How do such activities move people toward a “rich union with Christ” (p. 106)? Have your experiences with such practices led you in that direction? Why, or why not?
4. How do you respond to the idea that Paul was a psychologist, because his doctrine of redemption was a doctrine of the transformation of the self (p. 112)?
5. What are the three stages of personal redemption (as a psychological process)? In the third stage, “as we obey God, we’ll find we have a wealth of power on the inside” (p. 118). What sort of power is this? To do what?

## HISTORY AND THE MEANING OF THE DISCIPLINES

1. What are the many cultural and historical reasons that people view spiritual disciplines as useless or even harmful?
2. While people talk a lot about practicing disciplines, Dallas insists that practicing disciplines is not our goal. Rather, “it is the effective and full enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of

normal existence where we are placed” (p. 138). What does that tell us about how to approach disciplines? Is that different from the common approach?

3. If we consider asceticism to be “the disciplined effort to attain an end which cannot be attained without giving up many things often considered desirable” (p. 136), how are lifestyle choices such as going to college or getting married ascetic? How does giving up something just for the sake of giving it up taint a practice or decision such as these?

### SOME MAIN DISCIPLINES FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

1. Why are some disciplines called disciplines of abstinence? What are some examples?
2. How is the discipline of solitude freeing? What might a starting practice of solitude look like for you? Please be realistic. For some people, ten minutes a day would be revolutionary.
3. Of what value are the practices of silence and fasting? What might it look like for you to put them into practice?
4. How are frugality, chastity, secrecy, and self-sacrifice defined? How might practicing them form a person’s character?
5. Did you gain a new understanding of service or prayer when you practiced these as disciplines?

6. How are fellowship, confession, and submission related? What might it look like for you to put one or more of them into practice?

### IS POVERTY SPIRITUAL?

1. How are *possessing* riches, *using* them, and *trusting in* them different?
2. How would you summarize Jesus's teaching on poverty and riches? What does the Bible teach about how the poor are to be treated? Why do you think Paul advises associating with the poor and needy ("the lowly," Rom. 12:16, pp. 209–213)?
3. How might people use their possessions in redemptive ways, as they use their bodies? If you've experienced this, please talk about it.

### THE DISCIPLINES AND THE POWER STRUCTURES OF THIS WORLD

1. This book is about how change comes from within (p. 227). Consequently, Dallas asserts that placing restraints on people doesn't produce lasting justice, peace, and prosperity (p. 221). Do you agree or disagree?
2. What are "structural evils," and how are they crushed at their roots? When have you witnessed a deeply good

and selfless person making a difference in an organization or a city or a nation?

3. What is the role of the church in being Christ's instrument in developing transformed people who are squarely *in* the world but clearly not *of* the world, bringing the real presence of Christ throughout secular life?
4. Now that you've finished the book, have your thoughts changed about how people are transformed? If your thinking has changed, how might that affect your behavior?