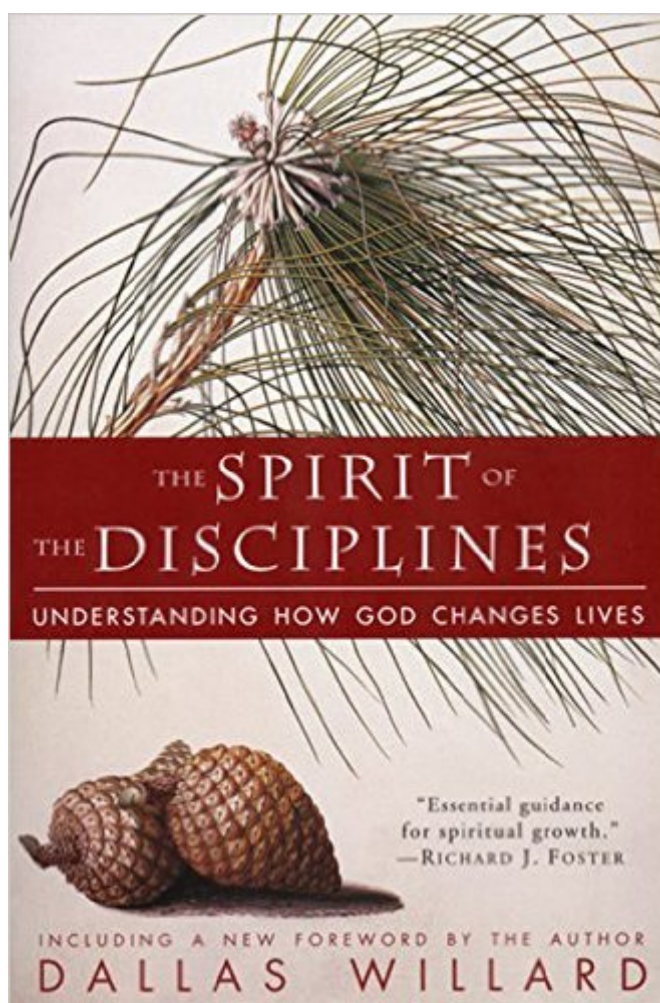


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The Spirit Of The Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives



Synopsis

How to Live as Jesus Lived Dallas Willard, one of today's most brilliant Christian thinkers and author of *The Divine Conspiracy* (Christianity Today's 1999 Book of the Year), presents a way of living that enables ordinary men and women to enjoy the fruit of the Christian life. He reveals how the key to self-transformation resides in the practice of the spiritual disciplines, and how their practice affirms human life to the fullest. *The Spirit of the Disciplines* is for everyone who strives to be a disciple of Jesus in thought and action as well as intention.

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Customer Reviews

"Essential guidance for spiritual growth."-- Richard J. Foster, author of *Streams Of Living Water* "A fresh examination of the nature of life and discipline . . . exciting and instructive." -- "The Disciple" "Few books have challenged me like this one. I would urge every serious minded Christian to read it . . . at your own risk" -- Bill Hybels, author of *Honest to God?* "A profound call to discipleship based on spiritual disciplines [that] awakens us to a forgotten truth, that the transformation to Christlikeness is realized through taking on the easy yoke' of the disciplines" -- Sue Monk Kidd, author of *God's Joyful Surprise, When the Heart Waits,* and *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*

This wise and compelling meditation invites us to a new understanding that sees salvation not only in terms of forgiveness of sins but in light of the total transformation of our lives. Dallas Willard presents a way of living that enables ordinary men and women to join with God and realize their

highest aspirations of well-being and -doing. The key to this self-transformation resides in the practice of the spiritual disciplines. Willard explains why the disciplines work and how their practice affirms human life to the fullest. The Spirit of the Disciplines places solitude and silence, prayer, simple and sacrificial living, meditation upon God's word and ways, and service to others at the heart of the gospel. "We need a deeper insight into our practical relationship to God in redemption," Willard writes. "We need an understanding that can guide us into constant interaction with the Kingdom of God." Speaking to what Willard identifies as "a widespread and deep longing among Christians and non-Christians alike for the personal purity and power to live as our hearts tell us we should," the observation of the disciplines can make the process of deepening and revitalizing our relationship with God a part of daily existence. "We can increasingly resemble Christ in character and in power by following him in his overall style of life," Willard affirms. "This was the method of his earliest disciples, and it is as valid today as it was then...To enter into and increasingly master such a life is what having faith in Christ really means." To enter into the spirit and practice of the disciplines is to move toward the authentic life of faith. The Spirit of the Disciplines is an intelligent, thoughtful guide to an enriched spiritual life, a book about how to live as Christ lived, directed to those who hope to be his disciples in deed as well as intention. It details why the disciplines are essential to our deliverance from the concrete power of sin, and outlines the ways they can help each of us achieve the blessings of the companionship of Christ.

This review, like any review of a book written by Dallas Willard, borrows from his other writings as it is difficult to unpack his main points without reference to his entire program. After the unfortunate and recent passing of Dallas Willard I purchased "The Theology of Dallas Willard: Discovering Protoevangelical Faith" written by Dr. Gary Black, Jr. This fantastic book is largely based on Dr. Black's Ph.D dissertation, it is the first and only of its kind, solely focused on Dallas Willard's teachings. The newest book, "The Divine Conspiracy Continued," is also coauthored by Dr. Black. After reading through the first 100+ pages it dawned on me that it was time to read or re-read one of Dr. Willard's books (allegedly Dallas preferred to dispense with the title of Ph.D next to his name [see 'The Steady Confidence of Dallas Willard' on JP Moreland's website at jpmoreland.com]). Believing this statement to be true, I shall refer to Dr. Willard by his first name in the remainder of this review--no incivility intended to those of you that have known this man personally. The book I chose to start reading was "The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives ("SD")." Just like all of his other writings and teaching, every single sentence of SD oozes with an intoxicating profundity and theological/moral incumbency and authority prompting one to reconsider

what it actually means to be an active follower of Christ. Although some reviewers complain of "redundancy" (repetition may be the proper term), these reviewers likely do not understand the context for the content in SD, they have not been exposed to the entire divine conspiracy, or they were simply not in the proper stage of life or state of mind to fully appreciate the import of "repetition"--and there is no actual culpability of redundancy in SD. (Dr. Black summarizes the Dallas' divine conspiracy in 'The Divine Conspiracy Continued,' stating "God's divine conspiracy is to overcome the human kingdoms of this world with love, justice, and truth. This includes the whole world and all of human society--at the individual, corporate, and governmental levels" [page 2]). Any alleged redundancy is wholly intentional and this is a fairly large theme in SD: interactive learning utilizing our actual bodies as we imbibe truths to be utilized for God's Kingdom, defined by Dallas as the range of God's effective will. Again, this is where those exposed to Dallas' wider vision and other teachings are able to glean the import of SD. For example, Dallas teaches that we are created in such a way that learning comes by way of participation, an "interactive" participation that requires repetition and the use of our physical bodies. Rather than simply read a book or listen to a sermon, if we want the real benefit of learning we ought to write out the main points (the actual use of our body--our hands in conjunction with our intentions--that is required in practicing spiritual disciplines). The result is an ability to retain what we read or are taught is increased by 8 times. We are interactively utilizing our physical bodies and minds, much like my typing this review. It is somewhat difficult to write a review of SD without being a tad autobiographic. I do not believe that Dallas would have had any aversions. In fact, he would likely embrace such a review as an application and/or conclusion of a purpose of SD. To be honest, then, like many of my brothers and sisters, my thought life has been terribly skewed with feelings of failure and my actions have become marginalized. Worldly circumstances, recent and childhood traumas have manifested and become overwhelmingly difficult to deal with leading to the marginalization of my relationship with Jesus. I have felt this for years, and this became all the more clear after reading SD and Dallas is quick to point out that he is not seeking to condemn to reader. I am 45 years of age, my wife and I have been committed believers for 20 years, I graduated from a well-known seminary and I have been formally involved in the culture war for well over a decade. My focus has been against the relegation of Christian truth claims placed into the category of mere belief and taken out of the category of knowledge. (For those well read or those in the academy this is known as the epistemic aspect of a worldview (a.k.a. knowledge). SD is also meant to provide a practical medium to combat this marginalization or relegation. However, this says nothing of my relationship, or lack thereof, and the present use of Jesus as a co-worker [or as my Teacher and general] in this fight). I have become so

entrenched in reading the requisite materials to help me engage the culture war that I lost sight of the real power and purpose that lay behind this calling. It took the contents of SD to show me where I have wavered off of the lighten path as Dallas writes and speaks with insights that are brilliantly haunting and difficult to shake. My feelings of failure are by no means a result of reading SD or being exposed to any of Dallas' materials (as I have read and heard some unfortunately critics suggest). Rather, as a Christian I intuitively know that I am falling short--I am not condemned because of my present state--but I need help at this time of my life and I have found it again in the Christian worldview. I have far to go so it will be interesting to read this review a year from now. In short, I need relational help, counseling, and so forth, and this is where the contents of SD shine. For those of you suffering (even suffering a similar problem) I highly recommend using SD in conjunction with other avenues of help (e.g., counseling). Up until his final days, Dallas was always very concerned about the same issues and his SD is one part of his overall solution, or divine conspiracy. As a world class philosopher, Dallas taught there is an external world and we can have actual knowledge of the world. In the context of spiritual growth, Dallas teaches that unless we realize we have the power to be like Christ now and to act in accordance with the range of His effective Will, then the answers Christians provide to four fundamental questions will have little import in the public square and the culture war. In his book 'Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge,' Dallas states that it is his hope for everyone to understand "knowledge, but not mere belief or commitment, confers on its possessor an authority or right--to act, to direct action, to establish and supervise policy, and to teach" (page 17). What are the four fundamental questions? (1) What is real or what is reality? (2) Who has it made [well-being or blessedness]? (3) Who is a really good person? And (4) How does one become a genuinely good person? For Dallas, the answers to these questions comprise one's worldview. One of the magnificent aspects of all of Dallas' SD is that he masterfully unpacks, in a very thoughtful and gracious manner, how one can presently begin living a properly full (or fuller) life, manifesting purpose, intention and the character of Christ versus focusing in the so-called "good days" when we were saved by God's grace. Dallas points out that focusing on our salvation and Christ's death (via God's grace) can undermine the full Christian life that is available now, by not simply focusing on an "instant" of God's actualized purpose for our lives when we are saved. The divine conspiracy as encapsulated by Dr. Black. This is by no means an easy read and I suggest reading SD slowly when you are awake, and are psychologically and emotionally ready or you would be wasting your time (this is apparent in some of the reviews). The core of SD is unpacked in chapter 1 through 3 and 7 through 11. Dallas reserves chapters 4 through 6 for a biblical explanation of who we are and what spiritual life is all about, and he informs the reader to

read chapters 7 through 11 and return to 4 through 6 as these are the chapters that focus on human nature and discipleship, including unembodied spiritual power--i.e., the spiritual life. Like some of his later writings, these chapters introduce the reader to God's view of the human persons, the flesh, our bodies working interactively with God's effective will. Chapter 8 presents a rich "history and meaning of the disciplines" and chapter 9 Dallas presents the spiritual disciplines within two contexts: (1) disciplines of abstinence (solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice); and, (2) are the disciplines of engagement (study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission). This list is by no mean exhaustive. Each discipline is accompanied by incredibly unique biblical, theological and philosophic insights unlike I have ever read before. SD, like all of his writings, must be read slowly and intently, readers should take notes, and they ought to re-read those sections that are most relevant to your life in order to put the contents into action. Unlike many other books on spiritual growth, the end of chapter 9 provides the reader to put the disciplines into practice as we are provided a basis to gauge how committed we are in following Jesus. That is to say, Dallas is wise enough to recognize that we are all in different places in our relationship with Jesus. Some readers desire to change and others merely have the desire to want to want to change. Therefore, as a starting point Dallas' informs us that the "range of the disciplines is largely determined by our own established tendencies to sin that must be resisted . . . [hence] (w)hich disciplines must be central to our lives will be determined by the chief sins of commission and omission that entice or threaten us from day to day" (page 191). In other words, we begin with those discipline(s) that are correlated to contravene those worldly habits that we exercise the most. In closing, I have much to do as I am now steeped in Willardian theology, a practical theology, and I look forward to being an active participant in the divine conspiracy.

Willard has given us a good book that becomes great in the final chapter. His handling of theodicy is maybe the most astute I've ever read. His insistence that there is no Christian but a disciple of Jesus is an important message that needs to be heard, digested, and become a persistent message from pulpits everywhere. This is an incredibly important message.

The principles in this book are life-changers. Based on life-patterns found in the historical biblical text.

This book was a requirement for one of my college courses at Regent University. I have to admit that it is captivating. I couldn't put it down. During the first week of class our assignment was to read

the first three chapters... I finished the entire book.

Dallas Willard is one of my all time favorite authors. I'm not sure, but I may have read every book he published. *The Spirit of the Disciplines* is a great book for explaining the hows and whys of spiritual disciplines. How can we expect to behave in the challenging moments in ways that glorify God and bless others, if we haven't been practicing living and doing as Jesus did in the everyday course of life? We fail and fall because we haven't taken the time to learn what walking in His image looks like, much less practice it in the strength that He gives through His Spirit. Dallas' style is gentle, gracious and endearing. I've owned this book for years and go back to it over and over. I'm glad to have the audio version as well.

The paradox of Christ's light burden and easy yoke and call to hate spouse, children, parents and your own life to follow Him is explained by the joyous disciplines of being a disciple. The proof of God's hand in this book is in its accurate diagnosis of impotent Christianity and encouraging challenge to embrace training for righteousness. The good news is that this book is a must read and a needed reference manual. The bad news is that you must read *Divine Conspiracy*, and *Renovation of The Heart* to complete the trilogy. But not to worry, reading them carefully will be the equivalent of having read thru the Bible several times so in the end you will have saved yourself time and perhaps saved your life.

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