

The Goal of Spiritual Formation...Love Formation

By Scot McKnight

Is it the disciplines that stand behind discipleship? Jesus prayed, meditated, fasted, kept periods of solitude, lived simply, worshiped and celebrated. But he rarely spoke about the disciplines. They are there, but they are not his focus. Because they are so objective, the spiritual disciplines easily attract legalistic and pietistic barnacles that turn them into ugly monsters. Because the disciplines can be quantified, counted and assessed, they can easily lead people to compare themselves favorably or unfavorably with others. And because they are acts, they can easily lead to a sense of accomplishment and superiority. A discipline-focus for spiritual formation can lead to legalism -- as evidenced by the Christians who congratulate themselves on their daily Bible reading, church attendance, or the superior vocations of their children.

Behind discipleship and beyond the disciplines is love -- love of God and love of others.

Just as the barnacle of legalism can grow onto the disciplines, so also can the barnacle of individualistic pietism. Individual piety is a noble good that produces other goods like sanity and tranquillity. But it can also lead to an egoistic spirituality that assigns God the task of serving me -- of making me a better person, of making the world clear to me, of swooping down to earth just for me.

The disciplines are important, they are well-worn paths, but they cannot become the central focus of the spiritual life. As there is something behind discipleship, so there is something beyond the disciplines. What is it that turns discipleship into a commitment that keeps us faithful? What turns the disciplines into a path of spiritual formation?

A scribe comes to Jesus and asks, "What is a life of discipleship? What are the disciplines designed to accomplish?" Because that scribe is a Torah-observant Jew and because Jesus is a Jew as well, the scribe asks this great question in a first-century Jewish manner: "Of all the commandments [and you know Jesus, there are over 600 of them], which is the most important?" "The most important," Jesus answers, "is this: 'Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no greater commandment than these" (Mark 12:28-31).

Behind discipleship and beyond the disciplines is love -- love of God and love of others. Radical commitment is fine, if it is fired by love. Spiritual formation is noble, if it produces love for God and others. Without love, to modernize Paul's words, we become either fanatics or egoists. When Jesus says we are to love God he is quoting from the *Shema*, from Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Most scholars think observant Jews recited this passage two or three times per day. But when Jesus goes on to say that we are to love others, he tampers with the sacred creed of his contemporaries. He adds to the *Shema* by quoting Leviticus 19:18, and in so doing creates a new creed for his followers...love of neighbor. Love of God is to be joined, at all times, with love for others. Both, always. Apart they turn humans into fanatics and egoists. Together they turn humans into the *imago Dei*, walking expressions of God's love.

By reshaping the *Shema* Jesus gave to his followers a creed to recite daily (you could form a habit of reciting it many times throughout the day – when you rise, walk, work, drive, retire). This creed is what gives discipleship a foundation and the disciplines a future. If our foundation of radical commitment is love for God and others, we live as God would have us live. And if we practice the disciplines in order to deepen our love for God and others, we live as God would have us live. **Discipleship is not so much about radical commitment as it is about radical love, and the disciplines are not so much about spiritual formation as about love formation.**

No one has said this better than John Ortberg, the pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church: "The true indicator of spiritual well-being is growth in the ability to love God and people. If we can do this without the practice of any particular spiritual disciplines, then we should by all means skip them."