



*Cliff Loesch*

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This week of devotions are adapted from my blog, *Sermons and Other Things* (<https://cliffloesch.wordpress.com/>).

*BIBLE READING: 2 Peter 1:2-11*

In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul uses athletes as a metaphor for the spiritual life. He says: “Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it....I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24, 26-27 NRSV).

If we want to grow spiritually, what kind of training is needed? Read the Bible and pray. These are foundational. God is speaking today. Jesus Christ is alive. Christ is our Living Teacher.

God continues to speak through the written Word. As Hebrews 4 tells us, “The word of God is alive and active.” We need to listen to the Spirit as we read—and keep in mind the full message of the gospel as we read rather than getting stuck on one confusing verse here or there.

But if we spend all our time reading the Bible and praying and never go out into the world and actually live our faith—what good is that? Are we really growing spiritually if we are not actually practicing the things God is revealing to us?

The things we learn by reading and reflecting really don’t take hold within us until we try them out in real life. The things we learn by doing become deeply anchored within us. The forgiveness of God becomes part of who we are when we actually practice forgiveness.

Read the Bible. Pray. And live it out.

*SONG: The Motions (Matthew West)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, we don't like to have to work at things, but we really do want to be like you! Give us the vision and self-discipline to be your true followers.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: Proverbs 27:17; Colossians 3:15-17*

What kinds of practices help us grow spiritually? I'd like to mention several that come to mind. We'll take the rest of the week to ponder our list.

Reading what other people have written is very helpful to me, and here is what I have discovered: My spirit goes dry when I am not reading regularly. Richard Rohr is one of my favorite writers. Even if I don't always agree with him, he always makes me think. Every time I read something he's written, I say to myself that I ought to read a little of something he's written every week. It just keeps the mental gears running.

And that's what reading in general does for me: it stimulates my thinking. It helps me think of things, or gives me insights that I might never have had on my own.

Richard Rohr makes the observation that private feelings have become our culture's highest form of truth today. He says it is a kind of ultimate self-absorption. He goes on to say, "We've got to listen to some greater minds, some greater hearts, some greater souls" (*Hope Against Darkness*, p. 9).

I find that if I'm listening, God can use almost any kind of writing to nourish my soul—even good fiction, or nonfiction on nearly any topic. The Spirit has a way of incorporating a wide variety of things into my spiritual growth.

Through reading, we are reminded that we, ourselves, are not the highest authority, and we allow God take us beyond our own experience for growth.

*SONG: Teach Me to Stop and Listen*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, may your Spirit guide my thoughts as I read, sifting truth from falsehood, stretching me, and sharpening my understanding.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: Leviticus 19:33-34;  
1 Corinthians 12:12-13*

I realize very well that I am luckier than a lot of people because of some of the travel opportunities I've had. I have been to Mexico with youth from my church, I have had the privilege of visiting Kenya, and I spent several days in Jamaica getting to know people there. I visited the United Arab Emirates—my first time in an Arab country.

All of these experiences with people of other lands and cultures have had a strong impact. When you've seen other parts of the globe, it changes how you see the world—and it changes how you see your own place in this world—all in a good way. It develops your spiritual life, too.

However, you do not have to leave home to experience the world, it is present with us wherever we live. If we are willing, we can find opportunities to interact with other lands and cultures right here at home. This concept includes people from my own culture who have a different background than mine, or people who hold different perspectives on life than I do.

When I experience the world—or people who are not exactly like me—I am reminded that my way is not the only way. I grow spiritually through these encounters, and I am able to love people better.

*SONG: Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: O Lord, sometimes we are so afraid of being worldly that we hide. Give us a hunger to understand those who are unlike us; show us how you live in people around the world.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: 1 Samuel 18:1-4*

Developing friendships that are strong and deep is another path to spiritual growth. Thomas Kelly and many other writers talk about friends for the soul—where the friendship goes deeper than small talk and deeper than just having shared interests and activities. For me, finding friends that I can talk with about life and faith at a deeper level is helpful for spiritual growth.

Really, where else can we go to learn that we're not the only ones who sometimes question our faith, or feel unloved by God, or have doubts about how Scripture is interpreted? These things are often difficult to bring up in a larger group. While it can be frightening to make ourselves vulnerable to misunderstanding, transparency and self-disclosure invite relationships that allow us to experience God in fresh ways.

It's also important to have a wider circle of friends and acquaintances: people who become a part of our expanded network, who add to our sense of groundedness and balance; people who are part of our support system and to whom we lend our support. We were created for community, and Jesus' words are for the gathered community as much as for the individual. How can we truly be the body of Christ if we are not willing to become one with each other through the Spirit?

Examine your friendships: Could they go deeper with a little encouragement? Do you have safe places to bring your fears, insights, or questions? Examine your community: Are you limiting it to those within your congregation? And do you work at being inclusive to others you don't know, rather than gathering only with your own group?

*SONG: More Than You'll Ever Know (Watermark)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Friend Jesus, bring me deep friendships that honor you, and make me a true friend to others.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: Luke 6:27-36*

In Matthew 5:46-47 (NRSV), Jesus asked, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” And he encouraged us to stretch beyond ourselves—to love those who are difficult to love. This is another path to spiritual growth.

We may think we don’t have enemies, but it’s amazing how fast they can come out of the woodwork—even in a church—when a controversial issue arises. It means loving those who are careless with our reputations, lie about us, or who, in fact, already hate us.

They may be short-term enemies, like those who cut us off in traffic, or sit at a green light while they are checking Facebook. Or who commit grocery store violations like going through the express lane with more than twelve items.

Our enemies must also include those who set themselves against Jesus’ followers around the globe—but not just those who persecute Christians. We should oppose anyone who exploits or oppresses others, no matter what form the aggression takes, and no matter who the others happen to be.

It’s worth spending time listening to God together about what it looks like to actually love these enemies. We know God’s love is an unconditional love that compels action. It often begins with our attitude, but sometimes action brings the attitude after the fact.

*SONG: The Love of God*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, this is too much for us. Open our hearts wide enough to receive your love in a way that makes us genuinely able to actively love others.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: John 13:1-15*

As I said earlier, spiritual growth is not just about inward growth; it's outward as well. If we are growing spiritually stronger on the inside—there should be a corresponding outward expression.

Is it possible to love others without being willing to serve them? Scripture lists a spiritual gift of service (Romans 12:7), but Jesus made it clear when he washed Peter's feet that we are all called to serve our fellow human beings. And while serving others doesn't come naturally for many of us, recognizing ways that Jesus serves us every day—through intercession, through the continual gift of his body and blood, for forgiveness—stirs up gratitude that leads us to keep his love flowing in our world.

We need to remember, too, that Jesus doesn't just serve—his service to us is sacrificial; it costs him something. Sometimes we're happy to serve, but we hesitate when it means we have to give up time, money, or some "thing."

Choosing to serve resets our ego; we humble ourselves, which we know is always pleasing to God, and we love our neighbor in the same way we love ourselves. It places us in proper position with a God who loves and serves: partnership. And that's the perfect spot to grow to become more like Jesus.

Each day, we can offer ourselves for service to Jesus, which often, if not always, involves serving someone else. Then we watch for golden opportunities where Jesus invites us to be his hands, his arms, his love for the sake of his kingdom.

*SONG: Lifesong (Casting Crowns)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Loving God, we see by your example that loving leads to serving. Show me how to partner with you as you love and serve those in my world.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 5:14-16*

The idea of letting your life speak is a major Quaker theme (it's also very biblical). But it doesn't just happen automatically. It takes some regular practice.

Just as you could never expect to become a good golfer when you only touch your golf clubs once or twice a year—you can't expect your life will preach very well without some regular development.

So what is the goal? What does spiritual maturity look like? I'll close by giving you a little snapshot of what I think it looks like:

I see a person who listens to Christ from the moment they get out of bed in the morning until they go to sleep at night—asking that the Lord will show them where to place their time and energy that day.

I see a person who recognizes God in every situation—in all the good things, but also in the frustrating and disappointing situations—always looking to see how God might work positively in both the good and the bad that life throws at us.

I see a person who believes that just about anything is possible—that God can bring something positive or hopeful out of anything. Maybe not what we wanted or hoped for exactly, but something surprisingly good nevertheless.

I see a person whose life invites others to see God's presence in the midst of life.

And when I think of spiritual maturity in this way—I see how very far I still have to go! May God help all of us to grow.

*SONG: This Little Light of Mine*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Holy Spirit, I want to keep growing to be more like Jesus, into a life that shines your love and light to the world.*

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