

the busy mom's guide to  
**spiritual** survival

Kelli B. Trujillo



Indianapolis, Indiana

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# introduction

## motherhood: a faith wasteland?

As I prepared for the birth of my first child, I decided to ready myself for the harrowing experience by interviewing some friends who'd already given birth. I asked all the usual questions: What happened when? How did it feel? Were you scared? What were the best and worst parts?

One of my friends, Melanie, had had two children and had given birth *au naturel* both times. *She is definitely an expert*, I thought and soaked up her advice like a dry sponge. She candidly told me about her experiences, infusing her stories with spiritual insight. She talked about Jesus and the pain he endured to give us new life—how as mothers we, too, go through extreme pain to bring a child into the world. She told me about the Bible verses she had memorized and repeated over and over during labor. She spoke of the sheer delight of holding her newborn kids and about the immense responsibility of raising a child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. My eyes glassed over, my heart sang, and I felt certain that giving birth would be the most profound spiritual experience of my life.

Then reality hit.

I'll spare you the gory details, but I will say that no Bible verse ever graced my lips during the actual delivery process. Giving birth was definitely not the spiritual high that I had imagined. Yet my friend was right on one account: Holding my newborn child for the

first time was a truly profound—and overwhelming—spiritual experience. *This child is mine?* I thought. *Oh God . . . help!*

Immediately diapers, nursing, diapers, burping, diapers, sleepless nights, and more diapers took over my life. In an instant, everything had changed. Gone were the lengthy morning study times, the reading, journaling, and note taking. (Who can concentrate after only four hours' sleep?) Gone were the penetrating conversations with Christian friends. (Who can listen prayerfully with a child dumping cereal on the floor?) Gone were the moments of deep personal reflection when my soul was consumed with the search for God. Now my identity was swallowed up in caring for the little person who had taken center stage in our family's life.

My spiritual journey had run smack-dab into a brick wall called motherhood. Sometimes it seemed to have completely stopped. I felt as if the tiniest crumb—a thirty-second prayer here, a short Bible verse there, a Sunday morning sermon (heard with one ear—the other tuned to the church nursery) was all the spiritual nourishment I would get for the next eighteen years. I soon came to a realization shared by many Christian mothers of young children: Although motherhood is a deeply profound spiritual experience, it can also become a faith wasteland.

*But it doesn't have to be!*

God created parenting to be an immense responsibility, but I don't believe he intended to press the spiritual pause button on a new mother's heart. Our spiritual formation shouldn't be on hold until our children enter kindergarten—or go off to college. Motherhood should *renovate* our spiritual lives, not demolish them. When you become a mother, you are still *you*. Your soul still thirsts for God, your heart still yearns to sing his praises, your unique identity and gifts do not suddenly become obsolete or focused solely on your child. You're still meant to press on, to run the race, to take

hold of the prize. (See 2 Timothy 4:7 and Philippians 3:12–14.) Christ is still in you, the “hope of glory” (Col. 1:27)! Your spiritual journey doesn’t end when your child’s journey begins.

To *renovate*, by definition, is to make fresh or sound again, as though new; to clean up, and replace worn or broken parts; to repair, refresh, revive.<sup>1</sup> From the rich teaching of Scripture and from the time-tested practices of the Church, we discover the basic habits and foundational practices essential for spiritual growth. These habits—the spiritual disciplines—serve as catalysts in the renovation process. Some of these classic disciplines, such as service, are inherent in motherhood. Others, such as Bible study, meditation, and solitude (you’ve got to be kidding!) seem incompatible with a life so jam-packed with activities and the demands of care giving that you can’t always find time to change out of your own pj’s.

Instead of ignoring these seemingly impractical disciplines and surviving on a subsistence diet of spiritual crumbs, let’s give these spiritual practices a just-for-moms makeover. So go ahead: Scrap the mental picture of a hermit living in a desert cave, a nun cloistered in an abbey, or a pastor quietly passing the hours in a study. Instead, take a look at your everyday reality as a working mom or a stay-at-home mom and begin to see your joyful, tiring, and busy life as fertile ground for amazing spiritual growth. Impossible? Don’t you believe it!

Let’s take a fresh look at some classic spiritual disciplines through the eyes of the busiest person on earth, a mother of small children. We’ll find out why these practices are so important for maintaining a vibrant spiritual life, we’ll examine biblical examples of each one, and we’ll discover some realistic, doable ways to implement these disciplines in everyday life—with kids. As a bonus, we’ll also garner some age-appropriate ideas for fostering the natural growth of spiritual disciplines in the lives of our children.

Here's one suggestion before we get started. Undertake this journey of discovery in the company of at least one other mom. All Christians need fellowship, and that is especially true for mothers with young children. While this book will be a great benefit even if studied alone, it will be even more valuable as the starting point for a discussion of spiritual growth among you and your Christian friends. At the end of each chapter, you'll find ten easy-to-try ideas to pick from, as well as discussion questions you can use to talk with other moms about the ideas in this book.

As you incorporate spiritual disciplines into your daily rhythm, you'll experience the beginnings of spiritual renovation. The Holy Spirit will replace worn or broken spiritual parts. Your deepening relationship with God will refresh and revive you. You'll offer a rich and vibrant spiritual example to your children. And you'll cherish God's faithful presence with you through each moment of motherhood.

So hop on board—let's start the journey!



# discipline that has nothing to do with spanking

**T**he threes can be much more terrible than the twos.”

This week I realized that my son’s pediatrician was right! Just days after my son, Davis’s, third birthday, it appeared that his mind had somehow been wiped clean of the basic human skills I’d labored so hard to teach him over the past year: listening, obeying, using words to express feelings. Now every other word out of his mouth was either *no* or *why*. But what I heard most often was the sound of toys ricocheting off the walls as he threw them around his room. The last straw was the surprise body slam I received after picking out the wrong pair of socks for him to wear. After the five-hundredth instance of sitting him on the naughty chair and listening to him wail in frustration, I was so discouraged with being a mother that I nearly joined him in a good time-out cry. *Why isn’t my parenting working? I wondered. Is it worth it to go through all the hard work of disciplining him? Am I a failure?*

Have you ever been there?

Nobody likes discipline. Kids don’t like receiving it, and moms don’t like dishing it out. It may be necessary, but none of us enjoys

disciplining her children. After a long day of playing “bad cop,” we usually end up feeling discouraged, downhearted, and emotionally exhausted. This is not the joy of motherhood we’d always envisioned.

Interestingly, we often feel the same way when we reflect on our spiritual lives and the inevitable contrast between our desire to grow and the time-crunched reality of daily life. Check out what these moms had to say to see if you can relate.

14 *Graduate Student and Working Mother of Two:* When I stop to think about it, I realize that I just don’t spend enough time or energy devoting myself to prayer, Bible study, and other spiritual disciplines. That drives me to feel guilty, spiritually dry, and frustrated.

*Wife and Stay-at-Home Mom of a Newborn:* It has been difficult at times to be spiritually plugged in. As the wife of a pastor, my lack of spiritual discipline makes me feel hypocritical. So many people are trying to tell me who I’m supposed to be and what my role should be.

*Stay-at-Home Mother of Two-Year-Old Twins:* I feel like God shouldn’t have to listen to my prayers and concerns if I rarely make time for him or for reading the Bible. Emotionally, it’s draining because I pile on the guilt and then avoid making changes because I fear that since I can’t stick with something, it’s just going to lead to more guilt.

*Working Mother of Two, in Christian Ministry:* Not practicing regular spiritual growth habits led to a very dry and dark time, my feeling depressed, unable to pull things together, and distant from people. I felt inferior to others spiritually. This inferiority feeling was especially difficult because I am in Christian ministry.

Did you hear that? Guilty. Frustrated. Hypocritical. Drained. Depressed. Spiritually inferior. That’s exactly how I felt when I began reading a classic book on spiritual disciplines while my first child was an infant. I was excited at first and so ready to deepen my

spiritual life; yet as I turned each page, I felt worse and worse and worse. *I can't do any of this*, I realized. *I don't have the time*. Almost immediately I began to question my own spiritual integrity. *Am I just making excuses? Am I a hypocrite? Am I putting on a spiritual show for others when in reality my spiritual life is a joke?* I tried to press on with the book, but the discouragement became overwhelming. I closed the book, put it on the shelf, and settled down with the sad conclusion that spiritual disciplines just weren't for me. In effect, I placed myself on a spiritual naughty chair—wallowing in self-inflicted feelings of guilt and failure. That's not exactly what I had in mind when I picked up a book on spiritual "discipline." I was looking for a book that would help me know God better, not one that would make me feel hopeless about the state of my spiritual life.

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If you understand that feeling, then this book is most definitely for you. If you're a spiritual June Cleaver with your home and faith perfectly under control, you can put this book away. But if you've dreamed of growing deeper yet have felt held back by the realities of your life, then, please, keep reading. But first, you've got to agree to Rule 1. Ready?

**Rule 1: No self-pity, self-induced guilt,  
or feelings of inadequacy allowed!**

That means None. Zip. Zilch. Zero. Nada. This is not a start-reading, feel-guilty, give-up, close-book kind of book. This is a book about real life, real struggles, and the real needs we all have. So get up off that naughty chair and get ready for a spiritual booster shot.

## why we do this

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In a basic sense, there is some connection between the type of discipline you give your children and the spiritual disciplines: Both are actions that result in growth toward maturity. Yet beyond that similarity, the spiritual disciplines we're talking about here are completely different from discipline that has the negative connotation of punishment or chastisement. Although we use the same English word for both types of discipline, the Bible uses several Greek words to communicate more specific connotations. For example, Hebrews 12:6–7 states, “the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” Here the writer uses the Greek words *paideuo* and *paideia*, which can also be translated as “chastise,” “instruct,” or “correct.”

But as we practice the spiritual disciplines, we're aiming for a different concept of discipline, one communicated by the Greek terms *gumnazo* and *askeo*, which are used in Scripture. *Gumnazo*—from which we derive the English word *gymnasium*—means discipline in the sense of athletic exercise and training. So we're talking about spiritual sweat here: regular “workouts” that keep our faith in shape. This is the word Paul used when he urged Timothy, “train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:7–8, emphasis added). This is the connotation the writer of Hebrews intended when he prodded his readers, saying, “Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have *trained* themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:13–14, emphasis added).

Askeo indicates the discipline of a master craftsman who employs skill, persistent determination, and great effort to turn raw material into a piece of art. Imagine here a sword smith laboring late into the night over a bed of white-hot coals in order to turn a chunk of raw steel into a perfectly shaped weapon. This is exercise, training, and discipline completed at great effort and personal cost. This is the concept behind Paul's statement in Acts 24:16: "So I *strive* always to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (emphasis added).

Discipline is never undertaken for its own sake. We don't discipline children just for kicks; and when we exercise to lose those too-familiar pregnancy pounds, we know our training and sweat are for a good purpose. It's the same with spiritual disciplines. There are some good reasons to push ourselves spiritually.

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### to know god

The primary reason for practicing spiritual disciplines is simple: to draw close to God; to experience deep connection and intimate companionship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (John 15:4 ESV). By integrating spiritual disciplines into our lives, we're able to *abide* in Christ—to connect to the nourishment of the Vine.

### to grow like jesus

We practice the disciplines also as acts of discipleship. We train ourselves by doing what Jesus taught when he said, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:10 ESV). The spiritual disciplines are drawn from Jesus' commands and teachings as well as from his personal example. As his

disciples, we learn from the very practices central to Jesus' life and we imitate them. We train ourselves to become like our teacher, Jesus. "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40).

### **to be transformed**

18 Another reason we practice spiritual disciplines is that they are the means through which the Holy Spirit changes us. As we grow from spiritual babes toward spiritual maturity, our lives are transformed; and the disciplines are one means God uses to "grow us up" in faith, holiness, and Christlikeness.

### **to be examples**

As mothers, we practice the disciplines in order to be examples for our children. As we live out the spiritual disciplines we can say to our children, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

## **avoiding wrong motivation**

Exercise and a regimen of healthy eating will help you improve your physical health, but if your aim is to change your eye color, height, or tone deafness, then you'll certainly end up disappointed. When we exercise physically, we must have the proper goals in mind; we need to be realistic and honest about what our efforts can accomplish. Similarly, if you have the wrong aims in mind when you practice these disciplines, you're sure to feel let down when those intended "results" don't materialize.

## **reward**

Our goal in practicing the spiritual disciplines is not to merit God's favor or earn God's grace. These aren't chores we do in order to win stickers or earn an allowance of spiritual benefits. We are saved through faith and not by works that we do (Eph. 2:8–9). God loves us because it is God's nature to love, not because we have bettered ourselves to the point of being pleasing in his sight. His grace is a gift we receive through faith in the sufficient work of Christ on the cross.

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## **punishment**

Furthermore, our goal in practicing spiritual disciplines is not to punish ourselves for sin. Self-deprivation, no matter how consistently practiced or how extreme, cannot erase sin. Jesus took the punishment for our sin upon himself when he died on the cross. He accomplished the ultimate act of forgiveness. We need not punish ourselves in order to rid ourselves of sin or our sinful cravings.

## **achievement**

Spiritual disciplines are not a way to become holy or righteous by our own efforts. It is true that they are an avenue for life transformation, but it is not we who make the changes—it is God's Spirit within us who changes us. As we do the work of exercising faith, God does his work in us.

## **pleasure**

It feels good to grow spiritually, but we don't practice the disciplines in order to experience the good feelings that can result from them. Practicing the disciplines can lead to feelings of contentment, peace, and closeness with God, but these are mere

byproducts. For there will also be times when the disciplines work quietly, not seeming to do much for you. Sometimes you'll feel the same as you did before, or even worse. So if your focus is on feelings, prepare to be disappointed.

## escape

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No matter how appealing it may sound to get away for a few moments of silence or solitude, we don't practice the spiritual disciplines as a means of escaping the hectic circumstances of our lives. This is not your ticket to a retreat into an imaginary, monk-like cell of spiritual bliss. The disciplines are a part of your real life—for your nitty-gritty, spit-up cleaning, finger-painting, lullaby-singing life.

## the disciplines

Depending on your church background, you've likely been presented at some point with a de facto list of spiritual disciplines—the practices that are considered essential for spiritual growth in your tradition. Some churches emphasize prayer and Bible study as the keys to spiritual growth; others stress the experiences of worship and fellowship; yet others key on the acts of financial giving and serving others as the identifying marks of a true Christian. Overbusy and highly stressed as we usually are, we moms tend to latch on to the basic practices emphasized in our church tradition to the neglect of other practices presented in Scripture. When our repetitive diet of these few spiritual “nutrients” leaves us spiritually weak, we're naturally led to question ourselves and surrender to feelings of despair and discouragement.

A basic survey of both the practices of God's people in the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament presents us with a much broader and more integrated



perspective on discipleship. We discover communal feasts and celebrations, regular periods of fasting, compelling acts of giving and service, lives of radical solitude and simplicity, convicting examples of hospitality, and more. In this book we'll explore fifteen of the disciplines practiced by Christians in Scripture and throughout Church history.

- Silence
- Solitude
- Scriptural Learning
- Prayer
- Meditation
- Life Change
- Evangelism
- Hospitality
- Service
- Simplicity
- Stewardship
- Fasting
- Fellowship
- Worship
- Celebration

There are other disciplines, but I've narrowed our focus to these fifteen central ones. That's not because the others are unimportant but because I believe these fifteen are foundational to our spiritual growth as women and mothers and, believe it or not, because they're all compatible in some way, shape, or form with life as a busy mom of young kids.

By the way, now would be a good time to introduce Rule 2. Ready?

## **Rule 2: No overachieving allowed!**

Your goal in reading this book is not to incorporate all the spiritual disciplines into your life at one time. Any effort along these lines will leave you feeling more stressed and will make your family think you've been brainwashed at some wacky spiritual self-improvement

seminar. Furthermore, you won't succeed. You'll only make yourself feel guilty and inadequate—which takes us back to Rule 1.

Think of this book as a spiritual disciplines buffet; as you read and consider each chapter, it will be as if you're visiting a buffet table and sampling a tidbit of every entrée before you. Some of the tastes will be totally new to you and could take some getting used to; others will be old favorites—comfort foods that warm your heart and put a smile on your face. So as you read, commit yourself to trying each discipline in some way so that you'll get a taste of what all are like. And give yourself a realistic goal (in accordance with Rule 2), like focusing on just one discipline each week (or each month), implementing only one or two Try It ideas at a time, or meeting twice a month with a small group of other moms to discuss one discipline. By the time you've completed the book, you will have tasted and gained initial familiarity with a bounty of spiritual practices.

Then, as with all good buffets, you can go back to the table for a second helping and zero in on the disciplines God is leading you toward. Sometimes God may draw you to focus on an area of spiritual weakness so that the exercise of a specific discipline will strengthen feeble spiritual muscles. For example, if you're tempted by materialism and consumerism, the Holy Spirit might prompt you to focus on the disciplines of simplicity and fasting. Or if you've had a week that's incredibly chaotic, God may prompt you to get refocused by implementing the disciplines of silence and solitude.

At other times God may lead you to find nourishment in disciplines that match your spiritual strengths, passions, and desires. You may feel drawn to expand on your already consistent experiences of worship, to deepen the level of fellowship in an existing close Christian friendship, or to incorporate more regular times of meditation on Scripture into your regular prayer habits.

The good news is that this is one buffet table where you *should* keep on going back to fill your plate. This training and striving through spiritual disciplines is the spiritual “solid food . . . for the mature, who *by constant use* have trained themselves” (Heb. 5:14, emphasis added). For us moms, that “constant use” likely won’t be hours spent in practicing the disciplines each day; we simply don’t have that much time. But you *can* commit yourself to implementing disciplines at a pace that fits your busy life. Out of the raw material of your life—the sweet, everyday chaos of motherhood—you *can* strive (askao) to imitate Christ and abide intimately with him. Through the Holy Spirit’s work in you, your life can be renovated into a work of art before God.

### talk about it

*Discuss these questions with a friend or a small group of other moms.*

1. In what way has being a mom had a positive impact on your spiritual life?
2. Has your role as a mom had a negative impact on your life? If so, how?
3. Can you relate to the feelings of the four moms quoted in this chapter? What effect does guilt or other negative feelings have on your own efforts toward spiritual growth?
4. Does the word *discipline* have a negative or positive connotation in your mind? Why?
5. What are you most excited about as you start your process of spiritual renovation? Why?

## try it

*In each of the upcoming chapters, you'll find ten Try It ideas to choose from to help you implement each discipline. As a way of getting started, take some time to fill out this personal evaluation.*

- Below is a list of spiritual disciplines, Christian practices, and spiritual growth habits. Mark each of these practices to indicate if they are a *frequent* part of your life as a mother, something you're *occasionally* able to do, something you're *rarely* able to incorporate into your real life, or something you're *never* able to do or have never done before.

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<b>spiritual discipline</b>	frequently	occasionally	rarely	never
intentional times of silence				
intentional times of solitude				
scriptural learning (such as Bible study or Scripture memorization)				
prayer				
christian meditation or contemplation				
self-evaluation and life application				
service				
evangelism				
hospitality				
simplicity (choosing to live simply)				
stewardship and giving				
fasting				
fellowship				
worship				
celebration				

discipline that has nothing to do with spanking

2. Of those you marked *Frequently* or *Occasionally*, which has been most helpful for your spiritual growth? How has it impacted your faith?
3. Of those you marked *Rarely* or *Never*, which disciplines do you most wish you were able to incorporate into your life?
4. As you reflect on the current state of your spiritual life, in what areas do you most want to grow? How do you think spiritual disciplines might help you do that?
5. Consider sharing your self-evaluation with a friend or small group.