

# LIVING AS A DISCIPLE OF JESUS

The traditional word "ascesis" or "asceticism" was meant to capture the Greek concept of the athlete in training. It drew from the athlete image two things: the overall lifestyle which the athlete was willing to follow in order to capture the crown, and the perseverance with which he pursued this lifestyle in the belief that it would take him where he wanted to be. Traditionally, Christian spirituality has always acknowledged that a serious approach to the spiritual journey would take over one's life and require the person to adopt a way of life that would foster it. It also considered faithfulness to this way of life as important. In the context of the development of the spiritual dimensions of one's human life, lifestyle refers to the way of life you adopt to foster the spiritual dimension of your life. It embraces all the things that you do to promote it, and those things which you do to remove obstacles to it.

## Principles to bear in mind when creating a lifestyle.

1. Lifestyle is not a matter of doing more, but rather making sure that what you are doing is effective, i.e. directed to the real issues, and appropriate to deal with them.
2. Lifestyle must meet your needs, and must be formed out of an understanding of your personal situation. Two people may have the same need, but that does not mean that they can take the same course in dealing with it.
3. Other people can help you to establish your lifestyle.
4. Life style doesn't shape, it allows for growth. Plan for growth, not comfort.
5. Keep it simple rather than complicated. Keep it explicit rather than vague. Lifestyle should be attainable.
6. Lifestyle and life. A lifestyle is better focused within your daily life rather than separate from it. Grow within your daily life, rather than apart from it. Find God in life, deal with the issues of your spiritual journey through life. Lifestyle is to be integrated into life rather than life into lifestyle. Life is more important than lifestyle. Lifestyle is in the service of life, not vice versa. Lifestyle should be life oriented. The goal of lifestyle is to live better: to keep the heart attuned to God, and your life Christian.
7. When preparing a lifestyle, be sure that it is directed to long term growth, rather than to immediate "highs". The development of your spirituality is a slow process which needs to be approached with patience. Lifestyle is not meant to solve everything at once. It will single out particular things to work with, and also help you to keep in mind the other things which need attention, but which are not being especially focused on at this time.
8. An appropriate lifestyle means that you will not be able to "live with" unchristian things in your life. They will not co-exist comfortably with an appropriate lifestyle.
9. There needs to be general and particular elements of this lifestyle. The general are elements which need to be in every lifestyle for the development of the spiritual journey. There are general principles of spiritual health, e.g, the need to pray and to practise virtue and avoid vice. There are other particular elements which focus on issues that are especially relevant for this particular person. Lifestyles that are too general often do not meet the particular needs of individuals, with the result that the individual may work hard at the lifestyle, but little growth occurs because the real issues are not being faced.
10. Foster positive existing elements in your life, don't just take on the negative aspects. Sometimes working with the positive elements is the best way to attack the negative ones, rather than vice versa. "
11. Always work with the root causes rather than the symptoms. Take on the more important issues first, because this may well cause some of the lesser issues to be removed. Watch the tides, not the eddies.
12. Time can be an important factor within a lifestyle. One can work round different time periods, the day, week, month, year. The basic unit may be the day or the week, so that one incorporates appropriate elements within it.
13. Build in relaxation.

## LIVING AS A DISCIPLE OF JESUS

14. Don't accept traditional things uncritically. Things that may have been important in the past, may need to be looked at critically to see if they are still relevant, appropriate and effective to-day. Be creative in establishing your lifestyle. Adapt, experiment and be daring in the things you choose to include within it. Profit from the wisdom of the past, but seek to apply it in a way relevant to the present. Don't keep things in your lifestyle that have no meaning for you. Make them meaningful or drop them.

15. Relate religious rules and obligations to your personal rule.

### Principles to bear in mind when practising a lifestyle

1. Faithfulness in adhering to your lifestyle is more important than any particular experiences that you might want to have.

2. Approach lifestyle with gentle consistency, rather than brute force. Gentle faithfulness is more effective than brief bursts of great energy.

3. A lifestyle must be flexible. Rigid adherence is an enemy rather than an ally. Adaptability is important. If the overall goals of the lifestyle are clear, one is able to use the lifestyle wisely without having to be its slave. The person is the master, the lifestyle the slave. Lifestyle is an instrument, a tool, which will be helpful when used wisely, but can be harmful if used foolishly.

4. The greatest enemy to lifestyle is the vice of acedia. It is a spiritual lethargy which undermines our perseverance and draws us from our tasks by suggesting other things that could be done.

5. Perseverance is the principal virtue relating to lifestyle. Unless one perseveringly adheres to the lifestyle one has chosen, one may as well not have chosen it. To bring about that transformation over a long period we need a lifestyle to which we are willing to adhere.

6. Patience too is an important virtue in following a lifestyle. A need to achieve too quickly, and to have quick results, will only lead to a search for techniques which can take you to your goal via a short cut or to give up your lifestyle.

7. Courage is required to establish and adhere to a lifestyle. Every new step demands courage. To step out of a comfortable situation with a view to growth which is demanding and difficult takes courage. To overcome procrastination and face the real issues of life takes courage. To adhere perseveringly to lifestyle takes courage. The journey to God should not be presented as something easy, which can be experienced without difficulty.

8. It is important when you commit yourself to a lifestyle that you regularly review it to see if it really is achieving what you expect of it. It is useless to go on if you realize that it cannot achieve the end for which you chose it.

9. Sometimes, those whom we trust can support us in our adopted lifestyle and we may choose to be accountable to them by asking them to keep us faithful to it. An important role of spiritual direction is to keep people accountable to the lifestyle they have chosen. Being in a community or support group which shares many of the elements of your lifestyle will help you to be faithful to it.

10. Lifestyle is always important, but lifestyles will change as one grows spiritually. Don't be frightened to adapt or change elements in your lifestyle when you have achieved something you have been working to, or when you find the elements of your lifestyle are no longer helping to achieve what you intended them to do.

### PERSONAL EXERCISE

## LIVING AS A DISCIPLE OF JESUS

- Title:** My personal Christian lifestyle
- Statement of Exercise:** Look into your life and jot down and describe those things which you have introduced or encouraged to create an atmosphere in which you can live more effectively your faith commitment. Reflect on what you have recorded in the light of the above remarks
- Purpose:** The aim of the exercise is to describe, and reflect on, how your faith affects the way you live, and how you arrange your life in a way that helps to foster it. It focuses attention on behaviour and faith commitment, and on the relationship between them.
- Approach:** The style of life you adopt is rooted in the values you consider important, and it is meant to foster those values. Married people need to adopt a lifestyle that ensures that their common life can grow and that there is a good environment within which their children can be nurtured. Lifestyle is meant to foster the values that are important to us. If our faith commitment to Jesus is important, we will ensure that we structure our life in such a way that permits this commitment to be nourished and lived out. If there are aspects of our life that militate against our faith life then we need to choose between them, and our faith life. In this exercise you are asked to look carefully into your personal lifestyle with a view to seeing what you have done to foster it. The exercise will give some indication of how far you are willing to go in letting your faith shape you life. It will give you and indication of how valuable that faith commitment is to you.
- Method:** Read the exercise with a view to understanding it  
Do the exercise  
Record your list  
Reflect on what you have recorded  
Record your reflections.