

How to Develop a Spiritual Nutrition Program

Every spring, after the long Michigan winter, I begin a walking program. I walk up Ridgeway Road until it dead ends, then come back to a cross-street, where I turn left and walk through the subdivision until it comes back out onto Ridgeway Road. Then I return home. It's about a two-mile walk, which I try to complete at least four times a week. I walk this route through spring, during summer, and into the fall, stopping it only when the temperatures fall to uncomfortable levels.

But that hits the point--when late fall or early winter hits, I quit the discipline. And I don't restart until spring. You can imagine the rest. In Michigan, we get colder temps beginning in November. Which means I typically go through the gigantic meals of Thanksgiving and Christmas and a long winter where I eat all the candy well-meaning people gave me for Christmas without exercising. Which means, I pretty much undo the good I did by walking for three seasons. Which means, starting a walking program in the spring is easier said than done!

I can't be the only one this happens to. If you've ever begun an exercise program, or a nutrition program, or a self-improvement program, you've probably experienced the initial rush of excitement as you began the program and experienced positive results. But unless you've been extremely committed to this program, you've also probably experienced the dullness of it around the two- or three-week mark. You may also have quit the program, giving up on the positive results you achieved.

We can see this process as a metaphor for our spiritual growth as well. We often begin well in our spiritual lives, but if we don't pay attention, we may find ourselves quitting the program we began. There are too many times I began a new year with the intention to read through the bible only to fizzle out mid-January when the reading called for me to slog through Leviticus and Numbers!

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But just like a good exercise or nutrition program will help us maintain optimal health, so a good spiritual nutrition plan will help us keep our attention on God and his mission for us in Jesus. This is what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 when he tells the Christians in Corinth, "I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it" (3:1-2, TNIV). He's referring to their early lives as Christians--they were not yet experienced in faith and had a lot to learn. That is why he gave them milk. They weren't ready for solid food. They were like infants.

Paul means this statement non-critically. This is the way it was; it's the same way with us. When we were first baptized, none of us had the depth of faith or spiritual maturity that we have now. At least, hopefully not. Therein lies the problem. Paul continues, "You are still worldly" (1 Cor. 3:3, TNIV). They haven't grown, they haven't advanced in faith, and they haven't matured. They are still acting like infants. They haven't engaged in spiritual growth.

Why? Because they are too busy fighting and arguing among themselves. They are too busy manufacturing divisions among them. Paul says as much when he states, "For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?" (3:3, TNIV). [Paul also points out several other reasons throughout 1 Corinthians why they are immature--they are putting up with worldly behavior in the congregation (ch. 5); they are suing each other (ch. 6); some of them are engaging in gross sexual immorality (ch. 6); some are using their freedom in Christ to lead others down a slippery slope (chs. 8-10); they are arguing about worship (chs. 11-14); and they are unclear about the resurrection of Jesus (ch. 15).]

A similar problem exists in Hebrews 5:11-14. Throughout this letter, Christians are reminded that it is relatively easy to walk away from your Christian faith if you do

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not remain anchored to that faith (see 2:1). The writer thus warns Christians to be careful not to wander away (6:4-6). But in 5:11-14 the writer makes clear that if people are not serious about their own faith they will likely fall short. In fact, he rebukes them on this point! "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make clear to you because you no longer try to understand" (5:11, TNIV).

He rebukes them for being too immature. He states that they should be teachers but can't, because they still need to be taught themselves (5:12)! They live on milk and are not mature (5:13-14).

How do we avoid this fate? How do we become mature instead of wallowing in immaturity? We need to put ourselves on a spiritual nutrition program. We need to put away the milk and begin eating meat.

The meat of spiritual growth is prayer and the word of God. Just like we need to eat good food in a physical nutrition program and exercise daily, so in our spiritual nutrition program we need a daily workout and regiment of prayer and the word of God. Jesus declared as much in response to a temptation when he said, "People do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4, TNIV). Jesus knew that without the word of God, and without prayer, we wouldn't be able to sustain our spiritual growth. The word of God and prayer are the meat of maturity.

We process the word best through meditation. The psalms attest to this over and over. In meditation, we digest the word of God and seek application, rather than simply accumulate knowledge about God.

- "Blessed are those who...meditate on his law day and night" (Ps. 1:2).
- "We meditate on your unfailing love" (Ps. 48:9).

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- "Your servant will meditate on your decrees (Ps. 119:23).
- "I...meditate on your wonderful deeds" (Ps. 119:27).

But a nutrition program also requires action. It's not enough just to eat right. We also need to exercise. In our spiritual nutrition program, we also need action. We need strength training. We do this through serving others. Going back to 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds them that, instead of fighting among themselves, they should learn from his example and be a servant (3:5). Later, he teaches about love and instructs them to love each other--which means not fighting and actively seeking the good of others.

In Hebrews, serving takes on more of an encouraging aspect. The writer teaches Christians to be together, to encourage each other, to not avoid others. In this way their faith would be strengthened and they would grow together (10:25).

A spiritual nutrition program combines food with action. Our food is prayer and the word of God. Our strength-training is serving and encouraging others. It's important to include all these aspects. If we eat right, we're only going partway. We're missing out on the fullness of what we can do as God fuels us. If we only serve and encourage others, we're missing the deep intimacy that comes from time with God.

We build our spiritual nutrition program through discipline. We start day-by-day, bit-by-bit, adding to it and refining it until we get where we need to be (and as God leads us). For some, this will require daily bible reading. Others may find more nourishment in praying the daily office. Some may read a big chunk of the bible once a week. However we receive the word, let us focus on the action that comes from it. This action is our strength training exercises. We build our strength through serving and encouraging others. Today: Begin your spiritual nutrition program.