

Spiritual Practice – May 2018

Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (The Apprentice Series Book 1) (p. 33-36). InterVarsity Press.

Sleep:

The number one enemy of Christian spiritual formation today is exhaustion. We are living beyond our means, both financially and physically. As a result, one of the primary activities (or anti-activities) of human life is being neglected: sleep. According to numerous studies, the average person needs approximately eight hours of sleep in order to maintain health. This tells me that God has designed humanity to spend nearly one-third of our lives sleeping. This is a stunning thought. We were made to spend a large portion of our existence essentially doing nothing. The failure to do so results in damage to physical health, loss of energy and decreased productivity. And our sleep deprivation often hurts others. More people are killed each year by drowsy drivers than by drunk drivers.

In Dr. Siang-Yang Tan's excellent book *Rest*, he quotes Arch Hart, who says simply, "we need rest more today than ever before in history." Dr. Tan goes on to show how in the 1850s the average American slept 9.5 hours a night. By 1950 that number dropped to eight hours a night. Today the average American sleeps under seven hours a night. We have dropped under the needed amount of sleep, and we are suffering for it on several levels. A poll done by the National Sleep Foundation showed that 49 percent of American adults have sleep-related problems, and that one in six suffers from chronic insomnia. A physician friend told me that the most frequent prescriptions she writes for her patients are for sleeping problems.

In contrast, a study was done by the National Institute of Mental Health in which participants were allowed to "sleep as much as they could" each night, and on average people slept 8.5 hours. Those who participated in the study said they felt happier, less fatigued, more creative, energetic and productive. God designed us to be stewards of our lives—body, mind and soul. We must begin with caring for our bodies, which apparently require seven to eight hours of sleep each night. To fail to do so obviously results in fatigue and, consequently, failure in other areas of our lives.

What does this have to do with Christian spiritual formation? The human person is not merely a soul housed in a body. Our bodies and souls are unified. If our bodies suffer, so do our souls. We cannot neglect the body in pursuit of spiritual growth. In fact, neglecting our bodies necessarily impedes our spiritual growth. Everything we do in our lives, including the practices of spiritual formation, we do in and with our bodies. If our bodies are not sufficiently rested, our energies will be diminished and our ability to pray, read the Bible, enter solitude or memorize Scripture will be minimized.

Spiritual formation is a combination of our action and God's action. We must do something, but we rely on God to provide what is needed in order to change. Sleep is a perfect example of the

combination of discipline and grace. You cannot make yourself sleep. You cannot force your body to sleep. Sleep is an act of surrender. It is a declaration of trust. It is admitting that we are not God (who never sleeps), and that is good news. We cannot make ourselves sleep, but we can create the conditions necessary for sleep.

I have stressed that the disciplines are not ways to earn anything from God, but wise practices that allow God to teach, train and heal us. Sleep, therefore, is a kind of “anti-discipline” discipline. Begin with this exercise and continue practicing it throughout the time you work through this material (and, I hope, for the rest of your life). You will never come to a point where you are above the need for adequate sleep.

The Discipline of Sleep:

At least one day this week sleep until you cannot sleep any more. If you need to, find a day when you can sleep in. Your aim is to sleep, or to stay in bed, until you can finally say, I am completely rested. I do not need to sleep or stay in bed a minute longer. You may need to solicit the help of others if you have family members who need your care. If you are unable to do this exercise, try another: aim to get at least seven hours of sleep at least three times this week. This may require going to bed earlier than usual. The following are some tips to help you fall asleep:

- Go to sleep at a consistent time each night.
- Try not to engage in activities that increase stress (such as, perhaps, watching TV or spending time on the computer) right before bedtime.
- If you are affected by stimulants (caffeine, spicy foods) avoid them in the evening.
- Do not force yourself to fall asleep. If you do not feel drowsy, read a book, meditate on a psalm, listen to soft music, or sit up and gaze out your window until you do feel drowsy, and then go back to bed. Until your body is ready for sleep, tossing and turning in bed will not work.
- If you awaken in the middle of the night, but do not have to get up, stay in bed. Give your body a chance to fall back asleep.
- Even with these tips you might still have trouble getting sufficient sleep. If so, it might be helpful to consult your doctor to see if there is a medical explanation. You could also see a sleep expert for more advice, or perhaps visit a counselor or therapist to see if there is an underlying emotional problem that might be hindering you from sleeping.