

3 Lessons on the Spiritual Life from Jonathan Edwards

By Kyle Strobel

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) is considered by many to be one of the smartest philosophers and theologians in American history. But more than that, Edwards is one of the great spiritual thinkers as well. Edwards helped the churches in New England navigate the work of the Spirit in the “Great Awakening,” and he continues to help pastors walk through these issues through his great work *The Religious Affections* (one of the most beloved spiritual classics of the Protestant church).

How can we learn from the spiritual practices of Edwards? Here are three lessons that are as important today as they were in Edwards’s time:

1. Spiritual Practices are God-Focused

When engaging in a spiritual practice, whether reading the Bible devotionally, praising God in church or even listening to a sermon, it can be incredibly easy to start focusing on side-issues. Maybe our lips are moving while singing a praise song, but our minds are thinking about everything else we have to do. Maybe we are reading the Bible for something to say that will sound smart and informed rather than hearing from God.

Whatever the case, Edwards would encourage us to have a God-focused understanding of practices. In other words, when we engage in spiritual practices, like those mentioned above or practices like fasting, prayer or solitude, the purpose is to *be with God*, rather than merely trying to get a task done. Once we forget that, we very quickly focus on making sure we are doing the act right.

In other words, rather than learning to be with God, the goal becomes perfecting the technique of a spiritual practice. This digresses rapidly to a self-focused form of spiritual practice, which is nothing short of idolatry.

2. Spiritual Practices are Relational

In light of the God-focused nature of spiritual practices, Edwards would remind us that spiritual practices are always relational. This can be hard to remember. Whenever we are learning a new practice, even if it is something like reading the Bible, we have to devote a good deal of energy and brain power on figuring out how to do it. The mechanics are not irrelevant, but as was just noted, they must not overtake the purpose of being with God.

Therefore, in the midst of our spiritual practices – *all* our spiritual practices – God

is calling us to himself. Whether we are reading Scripture, singing praise songs, practicing silence and solitude or fasting, we are called to be with God and to know him in relationship. Spiritual practices are a means of grace, Edwards tells us, and grace is always relational.

We do not come to know a distant god, or an infinite power; we come to know God as Father in his Son Jesus Christ. *In Christ* we are able to call God Father, and to know ourselves as His children. Therefore, our spiritual practices should always lead us in relationship and should always be built upon that relationship. Once we start trying to do spiritual practices to establish our relationship with God, even if we do so subconsciously, we fail to embrace the free gift of God in Christ.

3. Spiritual Practices should Lead to Affectionate Knowledge of God

Lastly, it is true that we can often feel overwhelmed when we engage in spiritual practices, frustrated that we fell asleep *again* in prayer, drifted off *again* during the sermon or found our time in the Word dry and heartless. Nonetheless, Edwards would remind us, God has called us to have more than just a working knowledge of Himself. God wants us to know Him *affectionately*.

To paraphrase Edwards, God does get your mind off of fleshly things by beating you up, but by showing you something better. The something better He shows you is *Himself*! Jesus is God's self-revelation to the world, and that revelation should break open hard and lifeless hearts to His life of love. Therefore, just as our spiritual practices should be God-centered and relational, they should lead us in affection. *But what if they don't?* If your heart isn't move by God, then we pray "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24) and "Without you I can do nothing" (John 15:5).

God is the one who must give us eyes to see His beauty, but we are called to open our hearts to Him in love. Spiritual practices are the means we do so. But there are many temptations when practicing any kind of spiritual practices. At the top of the list are the opposite of our three points here.

We will always be tempted to make practices self-centered, becoming proud at our discipline; we will be tempted to make practices mechanical, thinking the "right method" will solve our problems; and we will always be tempted to use practices to cover our guilt and shame rather than using them to turn to God in affection.

Edwards highlights these pitfalls for us and shows us a better way. Focusing on the Christian life as a journey of love that is God-centered, relational and affectionate reminds us who our God is. By embracing the love of our God we can come to walk with Him in all that we do. Edwards is a great guide to show us how we can do this in every aspect of our lives.