

The action needed to come home from the far country may be simple, but oftentimes staying home doesn't seem so simple. Furthermore, not becoming lost while at home can be downright tricky.

The purpose of this section is to help you discover a way of life that produces ongoing Awakenings, increasing Honesty, and constructive Actions—AHAs that will connect you ever more deeply to the relentless, reckless love of the Father. Then you will be less likely to leave home.

"STAYING HOME" IS BUILT ON THESE TEN SUPPOSITIONS:

1. While life with the Father is a gift, the vitality of this life is either enhanced or diminished through daily habits.

Just as physical life is a gift—you didn't do anything to receive it, you were just born—your spiritual life is also a gift. You were born again by the grace of God.

Your physical life can be diminished (or even ended) by your habits. If you eat too much and exercise too little, smoke too much and sleep too little, or work too much and play too little, you may physically die, but the life energy inside you will certainly dwindle.

You can also enhance the physical life you have been given through wise habits. Your control over the vitality of your physical life is not absolute, however. Other factors affect your vigor: heredity, environment, disease, and so on. But the influence your habits have on the quality of your physical life is substantial.

The same principle holds true with your spiritual life. Your relationship with the Father is a gift. But the vitality of this relationship will be determined, in part, by how you nourish it or neglect it. Choosing wise practices that enhance your grace-based relationship with the Father will help you stay home and love home.

2. Everyone is different. So the practices that build life with the Father will be different for everyone.

Good parents understand that each of their children connects in unique ways. One daughter connects with her father by sitting on his lap and reading a story. Another daughter feels restless and confined sitting still, even with a loving father. She connects better by riding bikes or going fishing.

Similarly, what connects one child of God to the Father's love is often different from what connects another. One child can sit with the Father for an hour reading the Scripture story and feel united. Another daughter of God may find that same practice uninspiring and even draining. But let this second child walk in nature, pondering a verse such as, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalms 19:1), and her heart fills with the love of the Father.

Embracing this principle frees you to find the ways you best meet and know the Father, which leads to Principle 3.

3. Experimenting with what practices best connect you to the Father will enhance your spiritual life and the likelihood you will stay home.

If you felt unqualified permission to experiment with what activities connect you most deeply to the Father's love, what would you try? What might you do? In essence, you become your own research lab. You put different practices in the test tube of your experience and see what results.

What happens when you turn the worship music on your car stereo up to ten and sing along? What is it like to spend fifteen minutes at sunset on your back deck in prayer and reflection? What occurs in your heart when you volunteer at the homeless shelter? What comes of being in your small group?

Isn't this how good relationships really work, after all? When a couple is dating, they try different activities together. They might discover they connect to each other when they work out together or take a long drive. They might discover that attending a sporting event or shopping at the mall actually disconnects them even though they do it together. Wise couples adjust their activities in light of what nourishes their connection.

This principle leads to the following corollary.

4. Beware of blindly following what others tell you is the way you ought to connect to the Father.

Here is a typical scenario that destroys life with the Father rather than enhancing it.

Jim has a powerful AHA. When he comes back to the Father, someone tells him that he should begin each day waking thirty minutes early for devotions. He should read the Bible for fifteen minutes and then pray for fifteen minutes. He starts that habit and finds it clarifying, inspiring, and invaluable. He assumes this is how everyone should meet with the Father.

So when Jim's friend, Shane, has an AHA and tells Jim about it, Jim tells him that he simply must get up thirty minutes early every day for Bible reading and prayer. This is the way to meet with the Father. It's worked for him, after all.

Shane sees the power this practice has in Jim's life. So he commits to getting up thirty minutes early for reading and prayer. But to Shane, this practice feels like drudgery. It feels empty. When he is honest, it feels like death. He begins to dread mornings.

Shane wonders, "What is wrong with me? I ought to love the Bible." Feeling guilty about his failure, Shane begins to avoid not just his devotions, but the Father as well. He secretly starts to resent the Father for demanding what feels like a monotonous routine (even though it wasn't the Father who demanded it). Shane's false guilt and growing bitterness become his first steps of wandering away from home all over again.

Or possibly worse, if Shane sticks with the morning practice despite its dreariness, his very determination can be the beginning of becoming the older brother. Shane might find himself saying, "I read my Bible whether I like it or not. If I can do it, anyone can. People who don't stick it out just aren't trying."

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Notice Shane's focus is now on reading the Bible, not meeting with the Father; on doing the "right thing" rather than on living in the Father's love. In a seeming contradiction, the habit of morning Bible reading is causing Shane to be more lost than found.

But that should not be a surprise. Life is not in Bible reading, nor in any particular practice you perform. According to 1 John 5:11, "Life is in his Son."

This leads us to our fifth principle.

5. If your spiritual practices are not leading you toward the Father's heart, toward greater love, joy, and peace, they aren't spiritual practices, they are merely religious rituals.

Any religious practice that is not building life with the Father through the Son is dangerous. Any habit that isn't drawing you into the zone of truth and compassion is a trap. It doesn't matter how "good" and "foundational" the practice is supposed to be. Every practice is just that, a practice. It is not god. It is not life.

6. Some practices may be "targeted," that is, pointed at a particular weakness or area of growth.

When you report a sickness to your doctor, you expect medication targeted toward that illness. When you employ a personal trainer to prepare to run a marathon, you expect targeted training exercises leading to that goal. It is the same with spiritual healing and growth.

Say that during Corey's AHA, he discovers he is quite arrogant and self-centered. What could he do? Going to church and reading the Bible may help in a general way, but what would target his pride? Corey could experiment with practices that might "treat" this flawed aspect of his character. Secret acts of service or regular confession of sin may be the best medicines.

If during Paige's AHA, she realizes she is deeply shame-filled, what might she do? She may need, in a sense, to do the opposite of what Corey does. She may need to intentionally allow others to compliment her and serve her, even though it is uncomfortable. Learning to receive unconditional love is what she needs. To be proactive, she might need to stop meeting with the toxic friend who abuses her heart and schedule time with a friend who unconditionally loves her.

Targeting spiritual practices can intensify the effect of your practices.

7. Evaluate your spiritual practices by their fruit.

Jesus said a good tree produces good fruit. Paul said that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, and peace. So evaluate your habits by this criterion: what fruit is the practice producing?

If a practice cultivates love, joy, and peace within, if it draws you into Zone 1, then it is a spiritual practice. It doesn't matter whether or not others consider the practice to be spiritual. If a practice fills you with the Spirit of the Father, it is spiritual.

If, on the other hand, you find that a practice is building pride, superiority, self-reliance, or shame in you—that is, if it is leaving you in a zone other than Zone 1—then the practice isn't spiritual. The practice is best modified or purged.

8. Since the purpose is to live in the Father's love and not just follow some prescribed list of rules, you can feel free to be creative in how you connect with him.

Galatians 5:1 says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

You can be enslaved to sin, as you may have discovered in the far country. But you can also be enslaved to oughts, shoulds, and musts, rules that have little connection to your relationship to the Father. It is through legalism that you can become the older brother. It is from the wooden adherence to the law that Paul is saying you are free.

Paul further says we are liberated to "live by the Spirit." That means you are at liberty to discover how you connect to the Father. You are free to learn what gives you life. The practices will likely involve traditional ingredients such as prayer, worship, service, and so on. But how you engage in these fundamental ingredients will be as varied as the noses on our faces.

So you can be open to what the Spirit will show you as to how best to connect with the Father through the Son. Is it through energetic worship? Is it through quiet meditation? Is it through serving the poor? Is it through challenging the rich? Is it through large-group classes? Is it through solo encounters with a mentor? Is it some of the above or even all the above?

Whatever connects you to the Father's love, joy, and peace; those are your holy habits.

9. Experimenting and testing your practices is an ongoing lifestyle. Different practices have different values at different points in your journey.

The little girl who, at age five, found great connection to her father by reading on his lap may find that pastime to be less meaningful as she grows. She may find that taking a walk with her daddy while talking about her day now connects her in a deeper fashion.

In the same way, a child of God may realize that a recovery group that was life-giving after her divorce loses its effect as she heals. Replacing the support group with a service group may connect her best with the Father during the next chapter of her story.

It is also true that some practices simply lose their effect over time just because you get used to them. They become routine. In a sense, you build a tolerance to the practice. The first time a person runs a mile, it may create a dramatic physical effect. But to run a mile every day and never change the regimen will lead to a decrease in the value. To switch up the distance and to slot in other forms of exertion will stimulate greater effects. In the same way, altering spiritual practices can improve their value.

Some habits, however, may be beneficial for a lifetime. The little girl who connected with her father while fishing may always connect with him in this way. The child of God who connects with the Father through morning devotions may always meaningfully connect with him in that fashion.

To stay awake to the effect that spiritual practices are having upon you is essential to maintaining a vital connection to the Father's heart.

10. You don't do spiritual practices because you are spiritual. You do spiritual practices because you are not.

Your spiritual practices are not proof that you are more spiritual than others. Just the opposite. They are a humble admission that without the influx of life that comes from these practices, you will inevitably lose your fire and stray from home. The truth is, most of us are not Awake to just how many sources of connection with the Father we need to sustain a fullness of spirit.

The "saints" who are known to pray for hours, regularly fast, or live in simplicity are not inherently more spiritual than the rest of us. They are just more humble, that is, more Awake to their need for help.

This is why the Scriptures encourage you with admonitions such as, "Pray without ceasing." The command is not setting some lofty bar of righteousness. It is an encouragement to recognize that your need for the Father's love and power is so daily, so hourly, so moment-by-moment.

Someone might object to these "Staying Home" principles, saying, "We shouldn't spend so much time focusing on ourselves! Isn't the Christian life about others?" Notice that while this objection sounds humble and holy, pride is smuggled into the center of it. Out of which zone would a person make such an objection? The assumption hidden inside the objection is that we are strong enough to be always giving, always loving, always others-centered on our own, as if we were superhuman. The assumption is that we have little need for help, which is a very dangerous assumption.