



Practicing the Way of Jesus - Part 2

Leader's Note:

CG material is shifting from being weekly to being split into parts. This practically means that each material isn't necessarily meant to take just one week. Perhaps you might split one part over two weeks. Feel free to go at your group's pace.

Value for Today's CG:

In today's CG, we'll practice our church's core value of *rootedness*. In practicing *rootedness*, we devote ourselves to undistracted and committed presence to one another during this meeting time. Today, we'll focus particularly on listening to one another and God by consistently wondering "*What is at the root?*" of whatever is being expressed.

Connection and Unity Exercise (Mutual Invitation):

In three words, how would you describe your personal roots?

- With the first word, describe your family of origin.
- With the second, describe your place of origin (e.g. rural, metropolitan, wealthy, mountainous, snowy, etc.).
- With the third word, describe your key motivation in the past few weeks (e.g. success, fear, hope, resignation, money, romance, faith, dreams, etc.).

Invite all to share with one another, taking note of anyone you'd like to follow up with to learn more.

Historical Roots of Christian Practice:

In an effort to continue introducing *Practicing the Way of Jesus*, we will examine the historical roots of Christian spiritual practice. We will look briefly at an episode in history and discuss what we might learn and apply from it to our current day.

As followers of Jesus, we have inherited a church stewarded over millennia by God's guiding Spirit and believers like us. Our past is spattered with points of grief (the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, religious "holy" wars, dictatorial oppression of differing beliefs, etc.), and it's appropriate for us to grieve these things and make sure they never happen again — especially not in the name of Jesus. Simultaneously on the other hand, our faith's past contains extreme beauty, grace, and goodness for individuals and society as a whole. (See Tim Mackie's sermons on [The Inclusive Paul](#) (11/6/16) and [The Exclusive Paul](#) (11/13/16) to learn more.)

To hone in on one movement of our Christian history in one corner of the world, the church was built upon the blood of martyrs devoted to the inspiring and abundant life made available in Jesus. For centuries, Christians in the Roman Empire were systematically persecuted. Not only were they forced into hiding, but they were also fed to lions in the Coliseum as a form of entertaining sport. But with the 313 AD Edict of Milan, Emperor Constantine legalized practicing

Christianity. The emperor himself emblazoned his army's shields with Christian symbology, and Christianity quickly became in vogue with the Roman elite. Those once martyred were accepted.

Ask:

1. Relating to this period in history thus far, what are some of the privileges you enjoy as a Christian in America?
2. When are times you've perhaps felt persecuted or looked down upon because of your faith? How did God feel more or less present to you in these times?

This historical motion continued. The popularization and elevation of Christianity to a place of social prestige brought freedom to worship but at the cost of true spiritual, devotional growth. Some in the Church began to fondly remember the closeness to God they experienced when facing persecution — an echo of Romans 5:2-4:

We boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

An awareness of this contrast between comfortable but spiritually empty lives with the painful but spiritually full lives of the martyrs gave birth to an entire renewal movement. How could Christians pursue God faithfully and passionately in a way that led to spiritual fullness while surrounded by the comfort of privilege? We might ask a similar question in the 21st century.

Around 290-350 AD, some known as the Desert Mothers and Fathers (such as Anthony the Great and Syncretica of Alexandria), left Roman society to become hermits or monastics. They committed themselves to practices of prayer, simplicity, fasting, solitude, silence, stillness, and the recitation of Scripture. By dedicating themselves to such counter-cultural practices, they recovered the intimacy with Christ that mindless participation in popularized, nominal Christianity did not provide. Their holy reputations spread, and these Desert Mothers and Fathers were sought out for their insights about Scripture, spiritual visions, and wise, practical advice. These men and women were marked by their devotion to God and radiance of Christian love, faith, and hospitality.

Christian practices, or spiritual disciplines, are not only Biblical ways of doing as Jesus did but also part of the rich history of Christ's church. While we may do things quite differently in our current day, we can learn from the examples of these historic believers in the desert, our sisters and brothers in Christ from the past. Likewise, when we engage in counter-cultural devotional practices, we do so to find intimacy with Christ and transformation into His loving, humble, and courageous likeness.

Ask:

1. With reference to Romans 5:2-4, in what ways do you think we can learn about practicing the way of Jesus from these historic Christian examples?
2. Why are spiritual practices (e.g. Scripture meditation, prayer, fasting, solitude, and silence) important for distinguishing God's people from the world?
3. How would spiritual practices benefit you? Your community? Your future?

4. What would make you interested or uninterested in practicing the way of Jesus?

Group Practice (Silence and Stillness):

One practice of the Desert Mothers and Fathers was prayerful stillness. Take 5 minutes as a group in silent stillness. Pray to God about anything coming to mind. It might be about this CG material or maybe beyond it. Practice silent stillness together and bring it before God. Ask God to show you the root of the concerns or thoughts coming to mind.

If time permits, take a moment to have a few in the group describe what sitting in stillness was like for them. Describe what came to mind, how it felt, or what it was like to do it together. How did they experience God?

Closing:

Have one person close the time in prayer, asking God to transform your group and our church into faithful practitioners of the way of Jesus.