



Practicing the Way of Jesus - Part 3

Leader's Note: CG material is shifting from being weekly to being split into parts. This practically means that each part 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.

Welcome & Opening Prayer:

Invite someone to open your time together in prayer.

Value for Today's CG:

In today's CG, we'll practice our church's core value of *faith*. In practicing *faith*, we trust the work of God, even if we can't see it perfectly clearly. In community, we trust that God is at work in one another's life circumstances and deep within one another's hearts. In this CG time, seek to proactively value faith by being curious. Regularly inquire with one another: *How does God seem to be at work through that?*

Connection and Unity Exercise (Mutual Invitation):

How have you seen God working in your life in the last week? Maybe He seems to be at work through circumstances, relationships, or within your own heart with new realizations.

A Quick Recap:

In our ongoing *Practicing the Way of Jesus* series, we have gone through two parts so far. In the first part, we offered R/SF's definition of practices and connected it to Scriptural examples in the early church and to our church's values and vision. Here's the definition:

"Practices or spiritual disciplines are a training of mind, heart, and body in the love of God and others."

In part two, we examined our Christian heritage and the ways counter-cultural practices have been central to maintaining and forming the church throughout history. We also highlighted how practices cultivate intimacy with Jesus.

What Happens in Practices?

We already established that practices train our whole self in the love of God and others. That's their big-picture purpose. But what happens in a single moment of engaging in a spiritual discipline? When we sit in silence for example, (but this could apply to any practice), we *"lead with the body to open the heart to the Spirit of God."*

Lead with the Body:

All practices are physical. Sitting in silence requires us to sit, to keep our mouths shut, to stop any sound from shaking the tiny bones in our inner-ears. We awaken our very bodies to seek the Lord. Over time, the simple embodied practices might take on a consistent rhythm or habit that's worked into our muscles' memory. But the point of a practice is obviously not just completing the physical task.

To Open the Heart:

We take the practice as an opportunity to open our hearts. A practice of silence might make us keenly aware of the noisiness in our own hearts. Lots of things swirl around within us. You might notice your intense feelings of worry, delight, pain, or hope. You might have the time to think through some problems you've been facing. You might recall a memory from high school when your friends quietly watched you get bullied. Or maybe your imagination takes off into a fantasy involving a promotion and bonus at work—coworkers carrying you off on their shoulders, chanting your name. The practice opens our hearts for us to see what's in there, feelings, thoughts, memories, and imaginings all together. But practices are not *just* an act of self-reflection.

To the Spirit of God:

We bodily engage a practice to open our hearts to God Himself. The point of practices is this relationship with Jesus. We find joy, intimacy, hope, comfort, challenge, and rest when we open our hearts to Him. God might feel far off or distant or perhaps nearer to you than yourself. Indeed, God is always already present with us. By engaging in spiritual practices, we acknowledge God's presence, sit in it, interact with Him, and choose to stay a while.

Ask:

1. What do you find helpful, challenging, insightful, or confusing about how practices "lead with the body to open the heart to the Spirit of God?"
2. Think of some of the practices you have done, such as Scripture reading, fasting, prayer, etc. In what ways did these practices help you open your heart to God? Were there also some times when you did not open your heart to God through the practices? What was the difference?

The Centrality of Self-Examination in Christian Practice:

Any spiritual discipline, such as silence, Scripture reading, fasting, or others, can call us into the riches of *relationship with Jesus*. This is their true purpose. Spiritual disciplines are a *means* toward the end of loving God and others. But sometimes instead of seeing spiritual disciplines as a *means of interaction between us and God*, we get confused and consider these spiritual disciplines the primary focus. How do we hone our attention on God through spiritual disciplines? Counterintuitively, self-examination is critical for relating to God.

Sure, it's possible for self-examination to become self-absorption, but just like in any other relationship, seeing and knowing oneself can help relationship with God. For example, any heart-to-heart conversation with another person requires us to share our own hearts with them. You listen to your best friend and care about his or her life, but you also tell him or her about your life, which makes you examine yourself. Likewise, in spiritual disciplines we sit in silence, read Scripture, or fast in order to relate to God, and this means that we share with God what's happening in our lives. We tell Him what we're thinking about or feeling while also faithfully discerning anything He might want to impress upon us. The Scriptures themselves demonstrate this necessity for reflection or self-examination in relating to God.

"Search me, God, and know my heart..."

Read Psalm 139 aloud as a group. Pay special attention to the kind of relationship the psalmist has with the Lord. As you listen or read along, pay attention to anything that surprises you.

Ask:

1. What are the characteristics of the relationship between the psalmist and God?
2. If you were praying through this psalm for yourself, what parts would articulate your own thoughts and feelings, and which parts would not? Why?
3. The psalm runs the whole emotional, experiential gamut: the daily, mundane “going out and lying down” (v.3), the marvelous highs of praise and wonder (v.14), and the dark complexity of hatred and anxiety (v.21-23). In what ways is the Scripture’s acknowledgment of the whole spectrum important for you?

Group Practice (Self-Examination with Scripture):

In a practice of self-examination, we will ask God: “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24). Take 5 minutes of quietness with this verse and ask God to reveal your heart to you in order to lead you in His everlasting way. Whatever comes up, tell God about it for the sake of relating to Him. If time permits, give space for a few people to share what arose between them and God in the prayer time.

Closing:

Have one person close the time in prayer. Ask God to uniquely develop His relationship with each person in the group.