



Practicing the Way of Jesus - Part 4

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 *humility*. In practicing *humility*, we choose to show up honestly with one another, neither puffing ourselves up in pride nor putting ourselves down in false humility. Today, we'll focus specifically on how humility frees us to laugh at ourselves. Have fun and feel free to add just a bit of extra humor to this meeting!

Connection and Unity Exercise:

Funny how humility and humiliation share the same Latin root: *humus*, meaning "from the earth." Share some stories as a group of times you've felt humbled or even humiliated. Extra points if your story connects to the "from the earth" root and involves being outdoors, camping, competing in a tough mudder, etc.

A Quick Recap:

Practices or spiritual disciplines awaken our whole selves to love, as we have defined: "Practices or spiritual disciplines are a training of mind, heart, and body in the love of God and others."

When we do a practice, we "lead with the body to open the heart to the Spirit of God." A practice is embodied and requires self-examination for the sake of entering into meaningful, heartfelt relationship with Jesus.

"People honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me..."

Read Matthew 15:1-20. The Pharisees critique Jesus' disciples' failure to ritually cleanse their hands before eating, and Jesus pushes back. It is not what goes in but what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person, Jesus explains, because this represents the heart's relation to God.

Ask:

1. What is Jesus' issue with the mindsets and practices of the Pharisees? How are they like the blind leading the blind into a pit?
2. If it's what comes out of the mouth that represents the heart, then why would Jesus care about the hearts of His followers more than their ritual behaviors?
3. How do you see yourself or those around you in this tension between spiritual practices being about the heart vs. being about particular behavior?
4. Jesus emphasizes the reality that what we say and do reveals our hearts. What have your words or actions revealed about your heart lately?

Potential Pitfalls in Christian Practice:

Have you ever taken a moment of quiet with God and found your mind drifting? Or sat to read Scripture, only to find yourself on your phone twenty seconds later? Or chosen to fast in prayer and found yourself mostly thinking about how much weight you hope you'll lose? Or committed yourself to memorizing a passage of Scripture and then boasted in your accomplishment? *Why does this happen?*

This is all so normal and predictable for us. In these moments, we can be like blind people leading other blind people into pits, like Jesus warned in Matthew 15. But before guilt and shame take over (not to say these aren't occasionally appropriate alarms that wake us up to God), let's observe the comedy of all this. On one hand, we have the almighty, perfectly beautiful God of the universe who is infinitely worthy of our attention, and on the other is a whole host of human fragilities that keep us *excessively diligent, apathetic, distracted, or perhaps even socially posturing* in spiritual practices.

Here are some good responses to these potential pitfalls. (If you find yourself falling into these pitfalls, just say so and laugh about it with your group.)

Excessive Diligence:

Pitfall: "I'm *so* doing it and *will* be perfect, be right, or be in control." (Note: A degree of diligence is good, but excessive amounts can turn us into Pharisees trying to prove our own righteousness through excellence in religiosity—Jesus' main adversaries.)

Response: Examine underlying motivations (like being right, being in control) and share them with God. Again, make this awareness of heart motivations content for prayer.

Apathy:

Pitfall: "I'm doing it, but I don't care." Or, "I'm not doing it, and I don't care."

Response: Tell God why you don't care right now. Apathy is from the Greek *a-pathos*, "without suffering." Ask God if there's any suffering in your life you're avoiding seeing, and then pray about it.

Distraction:

Pitfall: "I'm doing it, but my mind's elsewhere."

Response: Take a breath and focus, and talk to God about wherever your mind has been. No need to beat yourself up about it, because the wandering mind, too, brings fodder for prayer.

Social Posturing:

Pitfall: "I'm doing it (or not), but I'm making sure everyone knows I'm doing it."

Response: Take honest inventory of the desire to impress others or be considered respectable, admirable, awesome, good, etc. This desire can even make a person want to be dishonest and lie about their spiritual practices. Be honest with God about this condition of heart.

Ask:

1. Thinking back on your history in the church, when have you practiced or seen others practice spiritual disciplines in ways that were excessively diligent, apathetic, distracted, or socially posturing?
2. How did this affect you or them in the long run?

Practices and Temperament:

According to personal life outlook, deep beliefs, upbringing, and so on, each person might approach spiritual practices differently. All have their special gifts and skills as well as their unique hangups and inabilities. Again, we can celebrate our strengths and acknowledge our weaknesses with a laugh and ask for help. Some common temperaments are:

The Bee: High achieving, highly disciplined, highly dutiful. If God gave grades, they're shooting for A+ perfection with spiritual disciplines. Successful and reliable, but might have a tendency to be too hard on themselves or others. Think of the industrious bee's work ethic if it were applied to spiritual life. This type will be most likely to treat spiritual disciplines as tasks to accomplish or as ways to self-justify their own righteousness.

The Sloth: Generally relaxed, perhaps apathetic about many things, cares about God but not really pursuing Him. Their skill is their ability to bring relaxation and leisure to a busy world, but they might avoid good challenges that require decisive action. Think of the slow moving sloth. This type is more likely to neglect spiritual disciplines and deem them unimportant.

The Butterfly: Joyous and fun. Perhaps more than a little scattered, generally quite passionate but directionless. Think of the imperceivable flight pattern of a butterfly. Which direction is it flying? Impossible to tell. This type moves powerfully and passionately in relation to God, but then is likely to fall off any spiritual disciplines quickly due to lack of consistency.

The Peacock: Remarkable and inspiring to those around them. Invested in leaving an impression on others, whether to please them, get their approval, or get their admiration. They might treat their relationship with God and other believers similarly. Think of the peacock's majestically beautiful feathers. This type is tempted to use spiritual disciplines to look good rather than to interact with God and others on a vulnerable level.

Ask:

1. Of these sample temperaments, which do you most identify with and why? It can be more than one.
2. How do you see your temperament both helping and hindering your relationship with God through spiritual practices?

Group Practice (Journaling):

In a meeting dedicated to laughing at our greatness and blunders alike, we'll journal in the simple structure of a two-column chart. The left column can be labeled "What I noticed about myself." Recall what you might have seen in yourself by reflecting on the Matthew 15 passage, potential pitfalls, and temperaments. Label the right column "What this means for my relationship with God." Based on what you noticed, write a prayer for what this means in your relationship with Jesus. Be attentive to any impressions God might leave on you as well.

Closing:

End in a prayer of gratitude and appreciation to God. Allow a little time for each person to offer one-sentence prayers of thanks.