



Practicing the Way of Jesus - Part 5

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.

Opening Prayer:

Look upon us, O Lord,
and let all the darkness of our souls
vanish before the beams of thy brightness.
Fill us with holy love,
and open to us the treasures of thy wisdom.
All our desire is known unto thee,
therefore perfect what thou hast begun,
and what thy Spirit has awakened us to ask in prayer.
We seek thy face,
turn thy face unto us and show us thy glory.
Then shall our longing be satisfied,
and our peace shall be perfect.

- A prayer of St. Augustine

Value for Today's CG:

Our value for this installment of Practicing the Way of Jesus is *humility*. When you share or hear other people share, remember to do so from a place of vulnerability and curiosity. No question is too little to ask or "dumb." There should be room for anyone at the table (or couch or living room floor or wherever you're gathered). Seek to be humble in this way.

Connection and Unity Exercise (Mutual Invitation):

Name one thing in your life besides work that you dedicate a lot of time to.

A Quick Recap:

In our last installment of Practicing the Way of Jesus, we got to laugh and be honest about potential pitfalls we may experience while engaging with spiritual practices. We then spent some time looking at different temperaments using the images of an achieving bee, a directionless-yet-joyous butterfly, a meandering and apathetic sloth, and an outwardly impressive peacock. Hopefully, this was a revealing look at who we are and how diverse we can be as a group.

Practices Reveal the Heart:

As we have learned about spiritual practices, we have repeatedly seen that the things we try to suppress can actually reveal valuable information about ourselves. Spiritual practices reveal what's going on inside of us so we can bring it to God in prayer. How our mind, soul, and body react to certain practices reveals important information about our inner selves. With this in mind, let's talk a little about our hearts. We said that in practicing the way of Jesus, we "lead with the body to open the heart to the Spirit of God."

The ancient Biblical forefathers and even modern Judaism believe that the heart is the central place of the human being. It's there that the knowing, feeling, and willing of the human mind take place. A good example for this thought process is seen in Proverbs 4:23: *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."* Jesus picks up this idea in the passage we read last week. In Matthew 15:17-19, responding to the Pharisees who accuse Him and His disciples of breaking the traditions of the elders, Jesus says:

"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."

Again in Luke, Jesus compares the bearing of fruit from trees with the fruit of our hearts. *"A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of"* (Luke 6:45).

According to Jesus, our heart is essentially who we truly are as human beings. Jesus said to "love God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:28).

When we participate in practices, we get to see some of the underlying, often unglamorous motivations in our hearts. Practices are like mirrors that reveal who we are, both at our best and our worst. But when we make the practice the main focus, we can fall into any number of pitfalls, depending on our natural predispositions.

We might engage practices as a task to check off of our to-do list, a hurdle to jump over to earn God's favor, or a way to posture ourselves as "holier than thou" in Christian communities. We could treat them as a part of Christian life that "maybe I should do but have no time for" — not to mention any number of other ways we might slyly use spiritual disciplines to chase spiritual highs or self-justify our egos and self-victimization alike. Our hearts are revealed in how we approach practices. In all practices, the heart is revealed. We gain awareness of ourselves through them. This awareness is meant to be a means of connecting to God.

Ask:

1. According to Jesus, the contents of your heart are the source of your words and actions. Can you think of a time in your life where words or actions revealed something surprising or scary about what was really in your heart?
2. What do some of your current practices such as devotions and prayer reveal about your heart with God? Just observe non-judgmentally as if looking in a mirror.

Practices in Community:

It's easy to get confused about communal practices and individual practices. In essence, any practice can and will involve both aspects. Reading our Bible by ourselves is an individual practice. It is you, the Holy Spirit, and Scripture. No one holds you accountable, yet there is something within you that draws you towards this practice. But it's easy to fall into an autonomy that believes, "Nobody gets to tell me what to do or how to interpret Scripture but me." Christianity is meant to be a communal pursuit of God; and yet, in our western, individualized culture, it can be difficult to bring our individual practices into the light of community around us.

For instance, if you believe everyone around you has mastered the practice of reading Scripture, you might fear feeling shame if you were to share a struggle or frustration with it. But this vulnerable sharing may reveal to you how your individual time with God and Scripture are not as fulfilling as you hoped them to be — not as bonding with God as you want. What's more, your vulnerable sharing may invite others to share how they have experienced similar feelings. When we practice the way of Jesus together as a community, we experience a mutually inviting and beneficial way of relating and journeying together, as we remember that spiritual practices are "a training of mind, heart, and body in the love of God and **others**."

One of the hopes with communal practices is that you would experience communal accountability. Through accountability in community, we can experience support and encouragement from one another as we move towards the kind of relationships we desire to have with God, ourselves, and others. It's a communal journey to the same place. Community Groups should be a safe place for you to come as you are and share who you are with the group. A place where you can be loved and love others, and in grace, practice, fail, and grow together in love and union with Jesus.

At the same time, CGs are "call-up" communities (as opposed to a more combative "call-out" community). That is, we accept each other exactly as we are AND we lovingly call one another up into an ever-deepening relationship with God. This means being vulnerable, honest, and accountable to one another in how our lives with God are going. It's never meant to be condemning by any means! But it is a place to pursue more of God together and move further into the life He's calling each of us into.

Ask:

1. What do you see as the pros and cons of being communally minded in your practices?
2. What has been your experience with accountability in the past?
3. What do you think of being spiritually accountable to one another in this CG?

Closing Prayer:

End with the unity prayer, lifting up to God the concerns and hopes you have heard from your community.