

Spiritual Practices for Connecting with Jesus

From *Emotionally Focused Formation*

A few practical suggestions:

Disrupt your current routine and try something new—You likely have a regular set of practices now that may include some level of prayer, Bible study, service, community, or worship. These practices take place in a current rhythm of eating, sleeping, exercising, working and relating to others. But the truth is, “every system is perfectly designed to achieve exactly the results it gets.” Every place you’re stuck, every area where your relationship practices are not aligned with the way of Jesus, is being maintained by your current routine. If you want different results, you need to use different ingredients in a different rhythm.

If you are weary of some sleepy form of devotion, probably God is as weary of it as you are.

– Frank Laubach

Engage a mixture of daily, weekly, and occasional practices—Some practices you may want to engage in every day at a particular time. Some are better suited to be done weekly, and others (e.g., a full day of solitude) may only happen once every couple of months.

Start with a few and add more as needed—There can be a tendency at this stage to create a workout that includes every discipline known to man. Unfortunately, this is not in your best interest and will inevitably lead to burnout. Consider beginning with 3-5 practices (and probably only 1-2 that you do daily). If this is manageable and you find yourself wanting more, you can add additional practices slowly as you go.

Try both traditional and creative practices—There are a few practices that are considered time-tested classics. Specifically, most people could benefit from a regular practice of solitude. However, don’t feel limited by the well-known disciplines. Often, the most lifegiving Spiritual Workouts are those that allow you to experience God, yourself or others in brand new ways. Remember, anything that helps you connect with God, yourself or others can be engaged as a spiritual practice (e.g., going on a walk, getting a meal with good friends, taking one day a week to rest from work, playing an instrument, taking a nap and so on).

Make adjustments as needed—Remember, there is nothing magical about any particular discipline. Continually ask the question, “Is this practice helping me connect more deeply and authentically with God, myself and with others?” If it’s not, consider putting it aside for a time and trying something different. Your Spiritual Workout is not set in stone. Even if you find a particular rhythm very helpful in one season, chances are you will want to change it up periodically to keep things fresh. Any set of practices can become routine after a while, and it is your current routine that fuels your current practice. In other words, if there are breakthroughs that you want in a relationship or an arena of your life, what you are currently doing is supporting the status quo. So, if you want a breakthrough, change your practices.

A Brief Survey of Spiritual Practices

Below you'll find a brief description of some of the spiritual practices, as well as a few suggestions to get you started. Much more could be said about each one, and indeed, whole books have been written on many. The information below is taken from *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. Her book includes much more detail about each of these and dozens of others (including very practical exercises, if you're not sure where to begin!).

Solitude—The practice of solitude involves scheduling enough uninterrupted time in a distraction-free environment that you experience isolation and are alone with God. Solitude is a “container discipline” for the practice of other spiritual disciplines.

- Give God time and space that is not in competition with social contact, noise, or stimulation.
- Take a retreat or spend some extended time in a place of natural beauty
- Engage with God alone while you walk or run by yourself.
- Intentionally place yourself in the presence of God. Recognize that God is as near to you as your own breathing. Inhale God's breath of life; exhale all that weighs on you. Simply be alone with God.

Meditation—Meditation is a long, ardent gaze at God, God's work, and God's Word. Slowing down and giving one's undivided attention to God lies at the core of Christian meditation.

- Be still and listen—spend time mulling over, chewing on and ruminating over specific passages from the Bible or other inspiring literature, looking for how it applies to your life.
- Try meditating on people—seeing them as God sees them and expressing delight in them as God does.
- Pay attention to God with your body by slowing down, relaxing and breathing deeply.
- Meditate on the life and character of Jesus by chewing on selected passages or stories in which he interacts with God or with others.

Devotional Reading—Devotional reading or “listening” to Scripture requires an open, reflective, listening posture alert to the voice of God. This type of reading is aimed more at growing a relationship with God than gathering information about God.

- Prayerfully dwell on a passage of Scripture.
- Listen deeply for God's personal word to you.
- Read for depth, not breadth. Stay with one text until you are prompted to move to another.

Slowing—Slowing is one way to overcome inner hurriedness and addiction to busyness. Through slowing, the sacrament of the present moment is tasted to the full.

- Choose to drive in the slow lane.
- Look people in the eyes.
- Plan buffer time between meetings.
- Chew slowly and sit longer at the table.

Rest—Entering into rest depends on honoring our God-given limits. By paying attention to the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of the body, you learn when and how to rest.

- Schedule margin time into your day for rest and recollection.
- Engage in a restful activity: take a nap, read a book, go on a walk, catch up with a friend.
- Commit to getting a certain amount of sleep every night.
- Develop an intentional rhythm of rest and work in your life.

Unplugging—Unplugging calls you to leave the virtual world of technology in order to become present to God and others. It recognizes that personal beings are created for personal interaction with a personal God.

- Consider communicating face-to-face rather than virtually.
- Have a no-email workday.
- Choose to live without certain devices (e.g., phone, TV, iPad) at certain times (e.g., in the evenings, over the weekend).

Discernment—Discernment opens you up to listen to and recognize the voice and patterns of God's direction in our lives.

- Take time to listen to God; don't hurry to make a decision.
- Attend to the desires God has placed deeply inside you.
- Ask God to reveal to you the places you don't trust God and the ways you misunderstand God's character.
- Cultivate a conversational relationship with God in which you make a practice of hearing from God daily.

Examen—The examen is a practice for discerning the voice and activity of God within the flow of the day. It involves regularly coming into God's presence and asking several questions (which may be formulated in many different ways):

- When did I give and receive the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today? • What was the most life-giving part of my day? What was the most life-thwarting part of my day?
- When today did I have the deepest sense of connection with God, others, and myself? When did I have the least sense of connection?
- Where was I aware of living out the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control)? Where was there any absence of the fruit of the Spirit?

Confession & Self-Examination—Self-examination is a process whereby God's Spirit opens your heart to what is true about you. This is not the same thing as a neurotic shame-inducing inventory. Instead it is a way of opening yourself to God within the safety of God's love so that you can authentically seek transformation. Confession embraces Christ's gift of forgiveness and restoration while setting you on the path to renewal and change.

- In the presence of God, ask yourself, "Whom have I injured recently through thoughtlessness, neglect, anger, etc.?" Ask for God's grace and guidance as you seek to clean up that mess and restore that relationship.
- Ask some of your family and close friends to help you see your blind spots. Ask questions like, "What do I do that hurts you? How could I better love you?" Let their answers guide you in a time of confession.

- Enter into a covenant group or an accountability relationship where you cannot hide. Tell the truth about who you are and ask your partner(s) to pray for you and help you change.
- Imagine the kind of person you would like to become in your old age. Then look at your life and assess whether or not the way you live now is preparing you to become this person. Confess where you need to change. Ask God and your community for help.

Celebration—Celebration is a way of engaging in actions that orient the spirit toward worship, praise, and thanksgiving. It involves identifying and pursuing the things that bring the heart deep gladness and reveling in them before the Lord.

- Where do you most readily connect with God? Go to that place. What do you want to tell God about the joy you receive there?
- Intentionally place yourself in God's presence. Recall all of God's gifts, provisions, guidance and love toward you. Think of a way to celebrate and respond to God's work in your life—write a song; paint a picture; memorize a verse of praise; invite friends over for dinner and tell your story and listen to their stories, etc.
- Think about the people in your life who bring you joy. Ask God how you might celebrate them in a way that encourages them.
- Consider celebrating the seasons of the Christian calendar (Easter, Pentecost, Advent, etc.) in a new way. Start a new tradition to celebrate God's work in that particular season.

Community—Community exists when people connect with each other in authentic and loving ways that encourage growth in experiencing the love of God. They engage in authentic and vulnerable relationships that cultivate, celebrate, and make evident God's love for all the world.

- Ask someone to tell you his/her story. Listen to his/her story as deeply as you can. How does the story give you a deeper understanding of your friend, of God, and of yourself?
- Who in your life helps you to connect with God and live into your true self? Make a regular practice of meeting with this person.
- Think about those in your neighborhood or your faith community who are isolated or don't have family nearby. Consider including them in family gatherings. Practice what it is to belong to God's family—not just your nuclear family.
- Engage in mission with others in your faith community.

Hospitality—Hospitality creates a safe, open space where a friend or stranger can enter and experience the welcoming spirit of God in another.

- Think about all the resources God has given you—home, food, money, car, etc. How might you share those things with others so they might experience the reality of God's welcoming heart?
- Make a regular practice of inviting people into your home.
- When you are with another person, be fully present. Listen deeply and receive him/her the way God receives you.
- When you invite people into your home, silently pray for them before they arrive, while they are there, and after they leave.

Remember, this list is just a small sample of the countless disciplines that are out there. If you're interested in a more comprehensive survey, check out Calhoun's book. And of course, just

because something can't be found in a book doesn't mean it can't be practiced as a spiritual practice! Anything that helps you connect with God can be engaged as a spiritual practice.