

RHYTHMS



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# Introduction

*“We don’t try for godliness, we train for godliness through holy habits.”*

—Dr. Gary Oliver

We see faithful followers of God practicing spiritual rhythms throughout the Scriptures. These regular practices reinforce faith and create opportunities to connect with the Lord. Daniel prayed three times a day (Daniel 6). Jesus, even though He is God in the flesh, had a habit of retreating into solitude to pray (Mark 1:35).

Paul wrote to Timothy, *“...train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come”* (1 Timothy 4:7b-8). Godliness, or becoming more like Jesus, doesn’t just happen to us. Like an athlete training for fitness, there are routines and habits that transform us. These habits are to be done in faith, in community, and empowered by the Spirit.

This study aims to equip us to learn some of these habits and implement them in our lives. In this book, you will find an introduction to each habit or discipline that lays out the nature and purpose of the rhythm. Then, the “PROCESS” section provides reflection questions on a passage of Scripture that relate to the rhythm. If you are working through this study in a group, these questions would be great to discuss together.

The “PRACTICE” section includes daily readings and challenges for implementing the rhythm into your week, which is followed by “RESOURCES” for further study. Finally, a “NOTES” section is included with each chapter for recording observations from teachings or your experiences with the given rhythms.

The hope and prayer is that this study is the beginning of a new rhythm and pace to your life that allows you to draw closer to the God who loves you and to be transformed by His love.





# Spiritual Formation



## CHAPTER ONE

# The Rhythms of Spiritual Formation

THERE ARE RHYTHMS IN EVERYDAY LIFE. The sun rises and sets. We breathe in and out. Blood pumps in and out of our heart as it beats. Our universe and our bodies have a pulse. In music, we can tell if someone is in step with the rhythm. It can be beautiful and fun to sway with the pulse of music, and it can be awkward to fall out of step with it. An awkward dancer that is out of step but having a good time can be humorous, but a heart that is out of step with its God-given rhythm is no laughing matter; it can even be life-threatening. Some rhythms are more important to be in sync with than others.

What about the soul? **God, who has set all of creation into motion with various healthy pulses, has rhythms for the spiritual life, as well.** Are you curious? Even a settled atheistic or agnostic person is likely open to considering a Christian perspective on healthy spiritual rhythms of life. A person like that might even try a few on for size. Overall, most are open to positive growth and change as long as it is not too disruptive.

Let's be honest up front. Getting in sync with God's spiritual rhythms for life is less like dance lessons and more like heart surgery. This is probably where both the casual Christian and the unbelieving person will be tempted to bow out of the dance. But, if that's you, don't elect to go without God's invasive procedure. He has healing in mind for you. He has abundant, even eternal, life in store for you. As Jesus asks a crowd to take up a costly, painful cross and follow Him, His penetrating question is worth exploring: "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Mark 8:36). Is it possible to have all that the world has to offer, in all of the common ways in our present day and age, and still miss something? Jesus seems to think so. He also seems to think it is worth the cost to follow Him and find out.

Classically, the Christian spiritual rhythms have been called "disciplines." To be a disciple of Jesus is to follow Him. To be disciplined in the Christian sense is to follow His ways. Discipline is a kind of training meant to infuse everyday life. Some have called these spiritual rhythms or disciplines "holy habits." **To get in sync with the life-giving rhythm of God, it will indeed take some discipline to say "no" to certain things in order to say "yes" to better things in an ongoing, habitual way.** All these terms come together to fill out the picture of the process.

One term summarizes God's heart and the whole process well: "spiritual formation." The God who has formed each one of us in His work of creation desires to reform us to be like Jesus in His work of redemption. A quick, honest look in the mirror and at the world reveals that there is brokenness in need of mending and reshaping. That is the very thing God wants to do in us.

*"The needed change within us is God's work, not ours. The demand is for an inside job, and only God can work from the inside... human striving is insufficient and righteousness is a gift from God. Happily there is something we can do... The [spiritual rhythms] allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us."*

—Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

True spiritual formation will not come by faith in yourself and practicing the spiritual rhythms. Instead, realize that true spiritual formation is a gift from God that we receive from Him as we rely on Him. We trust in God's work as we participate in the spiritual rhythms.

### **2 Corinthians 3:18**

*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

**True spiritual formation is being formed by the Holy Spirit into the image of the Son of God, Jesus Christ—all of which pleases and honors God the Father.**

Believers and non-believers alike can benefit from the practice of spiritual rhythms, but *this* exploration of the spiritual rhythms is an opportunity to face God Himself, asking in faith for *Him* to transform you from the inside out. The process and practice sessions will focus on just that—engaging with God as you commit to engaging the spiritual rhythms.

*“...human striving is insufficient and righteousness is a gift from God... by themselves the spiritual rhythms can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done.”*

–Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

*“A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of his body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to act in a manner of Christ when put to the test without the appropriate exercise in godly living.”*

–Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

## PROCESS

**Read Galatians 5:16-6:10.** Use these questions to help you consider spiritual rhythms this week, individually and with others.

- According to this passage, what does it look like in practice to “walk by the Spirit” in order to bear the “fruit of the Spirit”?
- What should we turn away from and seek to stop doing?
- Who and what should we turn to instead?
- How is our heart revealed in our everyday habits?
- How can you allow God to transform your heart as you seek to develop healthier habits and spiritual rhythms? How might you express this desire to God in prayer?



## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in spiritual rhythms.

1. **Galatians 5:16-6:10**—Let God assess the health of your daily rhythms.
2. **Psalm 42**—Ask God to deepen your desire for Him and His ways.
3. **Romans 7:4-8:11**—Accept the struggle of growth and ask for God's help.
4. **Psalm 51**—Ask God to cleanse you from the inside out.
5. **Mark 8:22-38**—Commit to making the spiritual rhythms a part of your everyday life.

## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *The Life You've Always Wanted* by John Ortberg
- **Intermediate:** *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster  
*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald J. Whitney
- **Advanced:** *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

## NOTES



## NOTES



# Prayer + Meditation



## CHAPTER TWO

# Prayer + Meditation

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF PRAYER? Some simply don't think about it. Some overthink it. Some wonder if they are doing it right or not, as if a secret code might get through to God or get them what they want. For some, thoughts about prayer have a lot of religious trappings of certain times and ways—even uncertainty that God actually hears or cares. When some think of prayer, they think of formal prayers, like the “Hail Mary” prayer from a Catholic background, or informal prayers, like the “Hail Mary,” last-second pass in an attempt to win a football game.

The truth is prayer is part of spiritual formation. **God uses prayer and the other spiritual rhythms we will explore to form us to be like Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.**

*“Prayer catapults us onto the frontier of the spiritual life. It is original research in uncharted territory... **To pray is to change.** Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us.”*

—Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding Your Heart's True Home*

If spiritual formation is something God does as we participate with Him in the spiritual rhythms, then it makes sense that prayer—like a simple, ongoing prayer for God's help—would be central to that process. *Why bother praying?* Well, because you likely want to grow and need help (like the rest of humanity) in that process. God offers that help, and we access His help through prayer—through asking and receiving according to His promise and will that we find in Scripture.

### Matthew 7:7-11

*“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup> Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup> If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”*

### Philippians 4:6-7

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*



#### Hebrews 4:14-16

*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.*

*<sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

There’s more where those came from! And you’ll explore more this week through the PROCESS and PRACTICE sections of this chapter. But, these few scriptures give us a lot of good news about the rhythm of prayer. Jesus Himself says we have a good Father in God to ask and receive from in an ongoing, rhythmic way. We can see that prayer is a resource for our anxiety; God promises His peace as we pray. We can also see that because Jesus gave Himself for us on the cross, we have full access to God as we pray with faith, trusting the Father will give mercy and grace in our time of need. We do not need any holy intermediary besides Jesus, and with Jesus, we can each pray knowing we have God’s full attention and good intentions for us. Even so, God desires more from our prayers than the rhythm of asking and receiving from Him.

*“Prayer is the expression of the human heart in conversation with God. The more natural the prayer, the more real He becomes to us... **prayer is a conversation between two people that love each other.**”*

—Rosalind Rinker, *Prayer: Conversing with God*

Prayer, like all of the spiritual rhythms, is mostly about relationship with God. As our love grows into His great love for us through the rhythms of listening and talking, asking and receiving—that is, through prayer—we will find ourselves different people down the road. **We will find that talking with God has changed us for the better, and forever.** The Spirit of God will use our ongoing conversations with God the Father to reshape us into the image of the Son of God, Jesus.

There are many examples in Scripture and Christian history that can help you begin praying. You could read, reflect on, and pray the Psalms in your own words. You could use the “Jesus Prayer” (*“Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”*) from Christian tradition. You could simply say, *“Help”* and *“Thank You”* to God throughout your day and over your lifetime. More than anything, prayer is talking with God in relationship—asking and receiving, listening and speaking. The resources in the upcoming PROCESS and PRACTICE sections will help you get started, restart, or progress in your rhythms of prayer.

*“...take pleasure in and accustom ourselves to His divine company by speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with Him... all our activities whatsoever can be ways of holding little conversations with God.”*

—Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

*“...if prayer is to be a true conversation with God, it must be regularly preceded by listening to God’s voice through meditation on the Scripture.”*

—Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*

## PROCESS

**Read Matthew 7:7-11.** Use these questions to help you consider the spiritual rhythm of prayer this week, individually and with others.

- How would you describe your rhythm of prayer in the last six months?
- How would you summarize Jesus' main point in this passage?
- What is the significance of the different words Jesus uses for prayer and the promise He makes about prayer?
- How does prayer reveal what the heart believes about God in this passage?  
What do your prayers reveal about what your heart believes about God?
- What would it look like for you to take another step in talking with your good God about His good purpose and provision in your life?

## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in the spiritual rhythm of prayer.

1. **Matthew 7:7-11**—Reflect on the health of your rhythms of prayer.
2. **Philippians 4:4-9**—Use anxious moments as prayer opportunities.
3. **1 John 5:14-15**—Confidently bless people through mealtime prayers.
4. **James 5:13-16**—Use others' highs and lows as prayer opportunities.
5. **Luke 6:27-28**—Pray for God's best for those who mistreat you.



## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence
- **Intermediate:** *Prayer: Finding Your Heart's True Home* by Richard Foster
- **Advanced:** *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* by Tim Keller

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

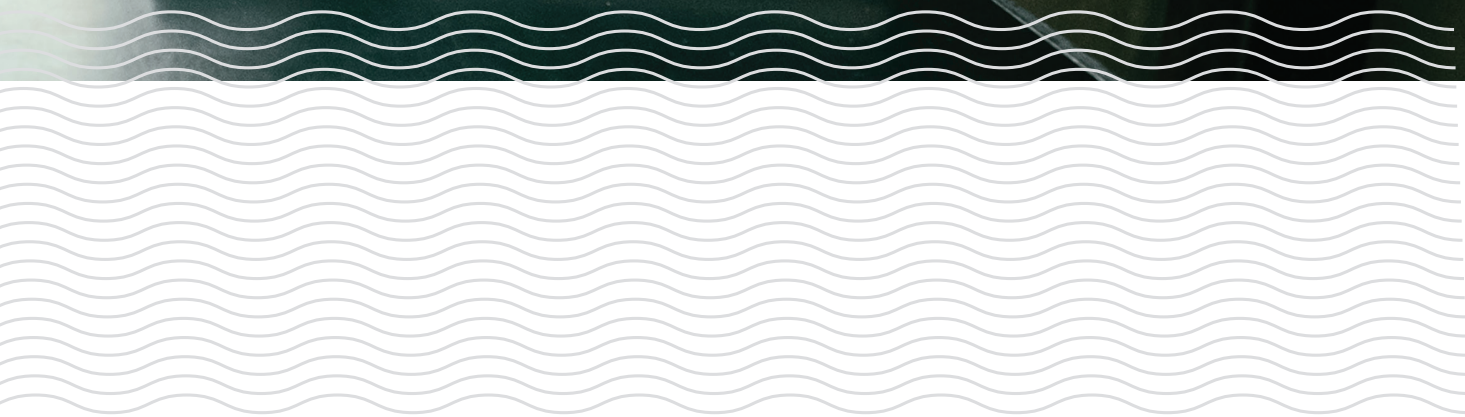
*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

## NOTES

## NOTES



# Fasting



## CHAPTER THREE

### Fasting

IN HIS CLASSIC BOOK, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says, “God intends the discipline of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who must wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, the disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our normal daily activities... The spiritual disciplines are intended for our good. They are meant to bring the abundance of God into our lives.”

If holy habits make up the rhythms of the normal Christian life, how does fasting fit into the picture? If anything, it seems like fasting is the opposite of abundance.

Fasting is mentioned over 70 times in the Bible, yet it’s commanded only one time. On their most sacred day, the Day of Atonement, Israel was commanded by God to fast and pray as the high priest offered an annual sacrifice for the nation’s sins (Leviticus 23:27). However, individual and corporate fasts were a frequent part of Israel’s spiritual life.

By the time of Jesus, Jewish rabbis had taken the devotional practice of fasting and turned it into law. They taught that righteousness required fasting twice per week. The Pharisees chose Mondays and Thursdays because they were market days and more people could see them. Fasting had become part of the religious show.

As expected, Jesus was opposed to fasting that exalts self. But what did Jesus teach about fasting?

#### **Matthew 6:16-18**

***“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do...<sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,<sup>18</sup> so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”***

“When you fast,” not “if you fast.” Jesus assumes His followers will fast. In fact, earlier in Matthew 6, He ties fasting to two other rhythms—giving and praying. Fasting is just as normal as giving and praying, but He emphasizes why we fast. We don’t fast to posture ourselves as more spiritual than others. Instead, we fast as a posture of our heart before God. This motive for fasting is highlighted a few chapters later when Jesus was asked a direct question about fasting:



### Matthew 9:14-15

*Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" <sup>15</sup> Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast."*

Jesus answered a plain question with a cryptic answer. Why didn't Jesus' disciples fast? Jesus answered: because fasting was not appropriate when He was present, but it is appropriate when He's absent. So Jesus believes the rhythm of the spiritual life includes both feasting *and* fasting. While the disciples were face-to-face with God the Son, fasting was not needed. They were feasting on His close, personal presence, but when the Son ascended back to the Father, Jesus' disciples would fast. Why? Because they missed His presence.

That tells us something huge about the purpose of fasting. Fasting is a rhythm we practice for the purpose of intimacy with Jesus. It's an aid in our communion with Jesus. **Fasting is an abstaining from something essential for the benefit of something spiritual. It's a purposeful emptying for the purpose of filling.**

In a land of plenty, fasting sounds absurd. Even when we do hear about fasting, it's often for purely physical health benefits, but that's not what Jesus emphasizes. What makes fasting a uniquely spiritual rhythm is when we choose to unplug from food, so we can engage with God.

Let's be clear about what fasting does *not* do. Fasting does not make us more righteous; only the Cross and the Holy Spirit can do that. Fasting does not make God hear us more; God's ear is already tuned to you. Fasting doesn't make that happen; His love does. However, fasting *can* tune *our* ears to God. How does it do that?

**First, fasting acknowledges our dependence on the Lord.** In the Bible, fasting most often occurs when God's people are desperate or have to make decisions. Fasting is an outward sign of an inner dependence. We fast because our souls are as dependent upon God as our bodies are upon food.

**Second, fasting creates space to hear the Lord's voice.** Fasting must be accompanied with prayer. Otherwise we're just going hungry. Fasting is coupled with prayer to create space to hear God better. Do you ever wish you could be reminded to turn to God in prayer more often during the day? The beauty of fasting is that every hunger pain is an internal alarm reminding us to pray!

**Third, fasting reveals our false dependencies.** The spiritual rhythms are both a window *and* a mirror. Holy habits open a window to see more of God, but they also hold up a mirror to show us more of our true self. Do you want to know your false dependencies? Go without something for period of time and see what bubbles up. The anxiety, anger, or restlessness you feel may be telling you that you've been filling your life with food, or drink, or social media, or Netflix, or... The fast didn't create those feelings; it merely revealed our dependencies.

If you're not in the rhythm of fasting, how do you take the next step? Start small and grow into the rhythm. This week, take one meal, or one day, to fast and seek the Lord in more focused prayer.

Most often, fasting involves food, but some people have made other things essential in their lives—Diet Coke, Facebook or Instagram, Netflix, coffee, chocolate... A fast from media or a delicacy for a certain period of time may be more effective for you than fasting from a meal.

Remember, fasting is abstaining from something essential for spiritual benefits. It's a purposeful emptying, for the purpose of filling.

*"We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface... Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels."*

—Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

*"Food is necessary to life, but we have made it more necessary than God... Fasting brings us face to face with how we put the material world ahead of its spiritual Source."*

—Majorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*



## PROCESS

**Read Matthew 4:1-11.** Use these questions to help you consider the spiritual rhythm of fasting this week, individually and with others.

- What do you notice about yourself when you get hungry?
- How might God use those insights as opportunities for growth?
- What is the significance of Satan's attack coming when Jesus was most hungry?
- What stands out about Satan's temptations and Jesus' responses?
- What would it look like for you to take another step to follow Jesus' example of fasting, ready to be filled by and empowered to fight using God's Word?

## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in the spiritual rhythm of fasting.

1. **Matthew 4:1-11**—Reflect on Jesus' experience of fasting.
2. **Deuteronomy 8**—Notice the grace of hunger and the danger of plenty.
3. **Matthew 6:16-18**—Choose to fast today noticing God's blessings.
4. **John 6**—Reflect on your fast and how Jesus saves and sustains.
5. **Isaiah 58**—Let your fast lead you in love toward someone in need.

## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster
- **Advanced:** *A Hunger for God* by John Piper

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

## NOTES

## NOTES



# Simplicity





## CHAPTER FOUR

# Simplicity

IRONICALLY, THE SPIRITUAL RHYTHM OF SIMPLICITY may be one of the more abstract and difficult rhythms to grasp! Are your life circumstances and lifestyle simple? Very few are in our day and age. If not, what would it take for you to simplify?

Perhaps you feel busy and overextended. Many people do. What practical steps could you take to simplify your calendar and commitments? Well, you may have to say “no” to some things. Which ones would you say “no” to? That becomes a question of values and priorities, doesn’t it? What do you value most? **It doesn’t take long before seemingly simple, practical considerations about simplifying your life begins to reveal what your heart values most.**

There are many ways to grow toward simplicity in your behaviors. You could simplify your possessions to free up space for generosity. You could simplify your schedule to free up space for rest or to give more effectively to the commitments you make. You could simplify your speech to not “undersell” and devalue or “oversell” and exaggerate to free up space for listening and for the truth. As you make those practical decisions, you have to make value judgments that speak to your priorities—to who or what you love. That means simplicity is ultimately an issue of the heart.

However, as soon as someone says a phrase like “inward simplicity” your initial response may be one of confusion rather than clarity. But remember, all of the spiritual rhythms work from the inside out. God changes minds, hearts, and souls when He wants to change lives. **God wants to simplify our lives for good, so He will have to simplify what our hearts love and trust.**

In Mark 10:17-31, a wealthy man who seems to do all of the right, religious things on the outside questions Jesus. When Jesus tells this man to simplify by selling everything he has to give to the poor and follow Him, the man goes away sad. As Jesus had said earlier in the Gospel of Mark, there really is a way to gain the whole world and still be missing something—your soul.

As the wealthy, religious man goes away sad, Jesus exclaims just how difficult it is for those who have more than enough to enter God’s Kingdom. In fact, Jesus says it is impossible to get into the Kingdom by what you do or don’t do, what you have or don’t have; only God can give that kind of entrance. When it came down to it, this wealthy, religious man loved his stuff more than generosity and following Jesus; he wouldn’t give up his kingdom for God’s Kingdom.



In Matthew 6:19-34, Jesus tells a group of people who are anxious and worried about *not* having enough to seek God's Kingdom and His righteousness first and let God provide everything else necessary. The wealthy man had too much, and the worried folks had too little. They were actually both missing the same thing—simple love and trust in God. **It is quite insightful to realize both excess and lack can cloud the mind, heart, soul, and life of a person.**

The temptation is to think that what we need is “enough.” It is certainly an important thing to consider as we practice the spiritual rhythm of simplicity: How much is enough? But again, what we really need is an issue of the heart and soul—we need contentment in God no matter the circumstances. If our hearts are simplified to the point of trusting and loving God and His ways, then we will have the capacity to be content in times of abundance and in times of lack. Why? Our worth, value, security, peace, purpose, etc. are not attached to external stuff or circumstances; rather, our minds, hearts, and souls are securely, simply attached to God.

When it comes to the spiritual rhythm of simplicity, possessions are a great place to start. How much do you consume? How much do you have? How much do you give? And the all-important question underneath—Why? What do you value most? The PROCESS and PRACTICE sections will help you explore and engage simplicity more personally.

Before you get too far, remember simplicity helps us in our journey of spiritual formation. We want the Spirit of God to reform us to be like Jesus. And our heroes in this day and age often start with nothing and end up rich and famous. But, **Jesus, the Son of God, gave up everything and became poor to the point of death on a cross to give all of His riches and glory and Kingdom to us.** He gave all of Himself and all He had to seek and save the lost. If you want to be more like Jesus, then the spiritual rhythm of simplicity of heart and life will help you along the way.

*“...freedom from anxiety is one of the inward evidences of seeking first the kingdom of God. The inward reality of simplicity involves a life of joyful unconcern for possessions.”*

—Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

*“Where there is simplicity, words can be taken at their face value. There are no hidden or double meanings... there is no artificiality. One does not try to appear younger, wiser, or richer than one is—or more saintly!”*

—Albert E. Day, *Discipline & Discovery*

## PROCESS

**Read Mark 10:17-31.** Use these questions to help you consider the spiritual rhythm of simplicity this week, individually and with others.

- What stands out to you about the wealthy man's question and Jesus' response to him?
- What could it cost to follow Jesus? What is the reward according to this passage?
- How does our attachment to possessions reveal who or what our hearts treasure most?
- How might simple trust in Jesus' words in this passage save us from the worry of too little and the excesses of too much?
- How might you solidify your devotion to Jesus by downsizing excess in some way to be generous?

## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in the spiritual rhythm of simplicity.

1. **Mark 10:17-31**—Ask God to assess your attachment to possessions.
2. **Matthew 6:19-34**—Notice anxieties connected with lack and excess.
3. **Psalm 73**—Notice the danger of comparisons and satisfaction in God.
4. **Psalm 16**—Downsize an area of excess to maximize joy in God.
5. **2 Corinthians 8:9; 9:6-15**—Display Jesus through a generous act.

## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *The Treasure Principle* by Randy Alcorn
- **Intermediate:** *Radical* by David Platt
- **Advanced:** *Freedom of Simplicity* by Richard Foster

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

## NOTES

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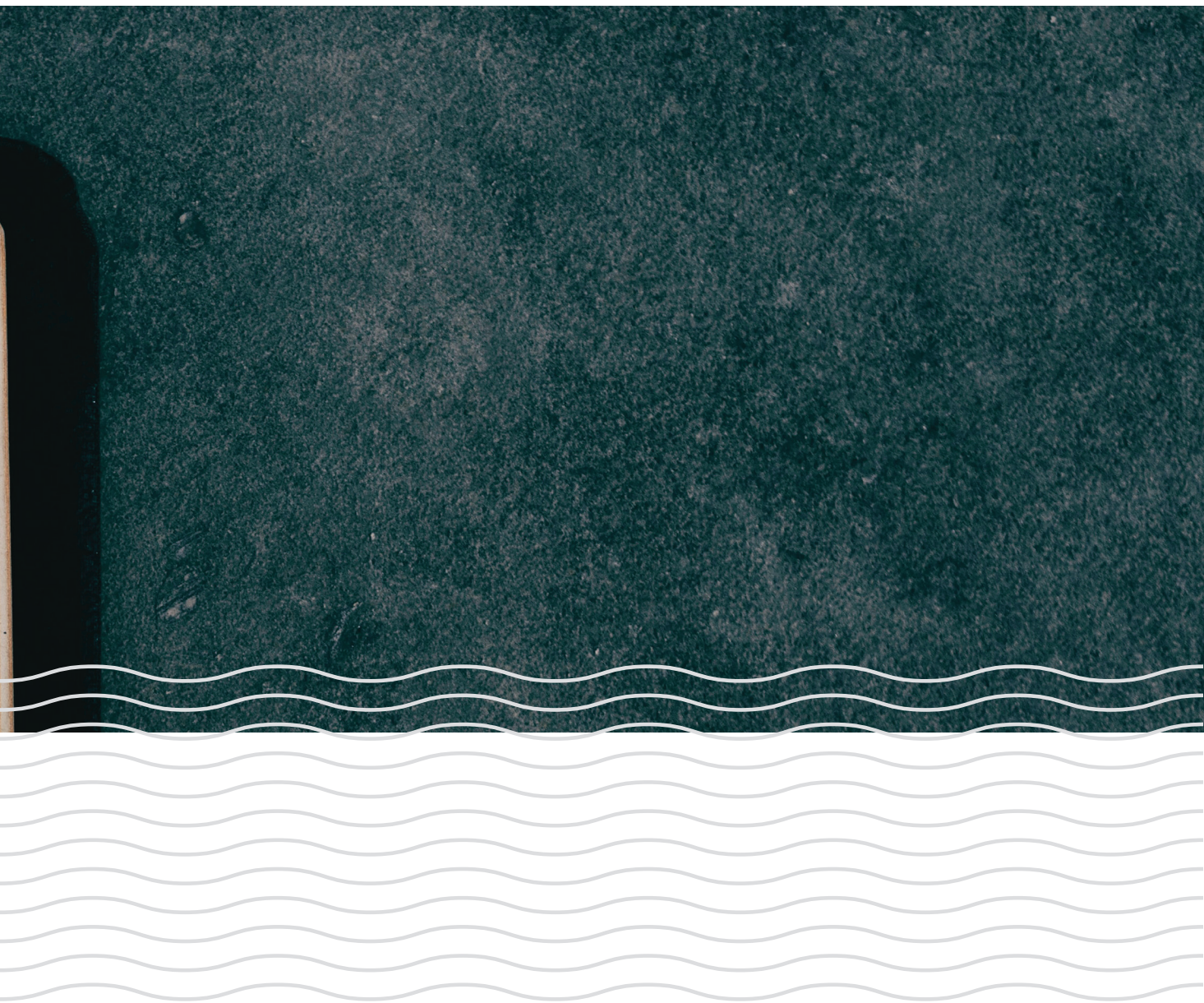
- 9 <sup>a</sup>Because of his strength I will give heed unto thee;  
For God is my high tower.
- 10 My God with his lovingkindness will meet me:  
God will let me see *my desire*  
upon <sup>a</sup>mine enemies.
- 11 Slay them not, lest my people forget:  
<sup>a</sup>Scatter them by thy power,  
and bring them down,  
O Lord our shield.
- 12 For the sin of their mouth, and  
the words of their lips,  
Let them even be taken in their  
pride,  
And for cursing and lying  
which they speak.
- 13 Consume them in wrath, consume them, so that they  
shall be no more:  
And let them know that God  
ruleth in Jacob,  
Unto the ends of the earth.  
*[Sē'lāh]*
- 14 And at evening let them re-

- 2 Thou hast made the land to  
tremble; thou hast rent it:  
Heal the breaches thereof;  
for it shaketh.
- 3 Thou hast showed thy people  
hard things:  
Thou hast made us to drink the  
wine of staggering.
- 4 Thou hast given a banner to  
them that fear thee,  
That it may be displayed be-  
cause of the truth. *[Sē'lāh]*
- 5 That thy beloved may be de-  
livered,  
Save with thy right hand, and  
answer <sup>a</sup>us.
- 6 God hath spoken in his holi-  
ness: I will exult;  
I will divide Shē'chem, and  
mete out the valley of Sūc'-  
cōth.
- 7 Gīl'ē-ād is mine, and Mā-nās'-  
seh is mine:  
E'phra'im also is the defence  
of my head;  
Judah is my <sup>a</sup>scepter.

- Lead me to <sup>a</sup>the rock that is  
higher than I.
- 3 For thou hast been a refuge  
for me,  
A strong tower from the enemy.
- 4 I will dwell in thy <sup>a</sup>tabernacle  
for ever:  
I will take refuge in the covert  
of thy wings. *[Sē'lāh]*
- 5 For thou, O God, hast heard  
my vows:  
Thou hast <sup>a</sup>given me the heri-  
tage of those that fear thy  
name.
- 6 Thou wilt prolong the king's life;  
His years shall be as many  
generations.
- 7 He shall abide before God for  
ever:  
Oh prepare lovingkindness and  
truth, that they may preserve  
him.
- 8 So will I sing praise unto thy  
name for ever,  
That I may daily perform my  
vows.



**Word**



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Word

IT SHOULD REALLY COME AS NO SURPRISE when you hear a lot of emphasis put on reading the Bible. Many of us wrestle with the reality that we don't read as much as we *should* or *ought* to read. How can statements like that be measured? How much is *should* or *ought*? Perhaps a better question is, "*Am I reading as much as I want to read?*". In most of life, we only put forth the effort necessary to accomplish something if there is sufficient desire to motivate us.

So what might be the motivation that would spur us on to make spending time reading the Word a regular rhythm in our lives? Let's be honest, guilt and obligation won't get the job done. It may motivate us to get going, and for a few, it might keep us going. But for most, it just isn't enough to sustain the rhythm.

Let's take a moment to examine a few encounters in Jesus' life where He talked about the Scriptures. To one group He said that they were diligently reading and even studying the Scriptures because they believed them to be the source of eternal life (an idea Jesus didn't contradict). However, they were missing the point because Jesus said the Scriptures testified of Him (John 5:39). After His resurrection, Jesus encountered a couple of His followers who didn't understand what had happened with the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus then started with "Moses and the Prophets" and showed them how the Scriptures all pointed to Him (Luke 24:13-27). Jesus says in John 17:3 that eternal life is knowing God and knowing His Son. He tells His disciples in John 8 that if they remained in His Word, they would know the truth, and that truth would make them free. Later in John 14, He says "I am the truth."

**The point of all this is that we are not just reading the Bible for information, but for relationship.**

*"Here, therefore, is a further reason why God speaks to us: not only to move us to do what He wants, but to enable us to know Him so that we may love Him."*

—J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*

What if we started reading the Bible like that, as if we were encountering a person and getting to know Him better? Would that be enough motivation to get us to do the work necessary to make it happen? **What if we didn't see the Bible as just some ancient writings by some guys "long, long ago and far, far away" but**

**instead given to us from God Himself to let us look into His heart and mind and begin to know who He is?**

Consider the difference between how a motivated student reads a textbook and how a person in love reads letters from their beloved. Both can be diligent and thorough. But the person in love reads for more than discovery and information. They read for relationship: to know a person they love.

That is the point Packer was making. **The Bible doesn't just tell us about God, it is a place where we can "meet" Him and get to know Him.** So as you work on developing the rhythm of Word in your life, it may take some effort to get it going. Keep reminding yourself that in the Word, you are getting to know Jesus and He is worth the effort.

*“...the study of Scripture centers on exegesis; the meditation of Scripture centers on internalizing and personalizing the passage... Meditation is devotional; study is analytical. Meditation will relish a word; study will explicate it... study provides a certain objective framework within which meditation can successfully function.”*

–Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

*“...God’s Word seeks to enter in and remain with us. It strives to stir us, to work and operate in us, so that we shall not get away from it the whole day long. Then it will do its work in us...”*

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

## PROCESS

**Read Psalm 19.** Use these questions to help you consider the spiritual rhythm of the Word this week, individually and with others.

- What are the ways God reveals Himself to us in this passage?
- According to this psalm, what benefits come from experiencing God's Word?
- What good results come from internalizing God's Word?
- How have you experienced what the psalmist describes with God through His Word?
- What benefits do you hope to gain from engaging in God's Word?



## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in the spiritual rhythm of the Word.

1. **Psalm 19**—Ask God to assess your value of His Word and ways.
2. **Psalm 119:1-88**—Write down a verse to carry with you throughout the day.
3. **Psalm 119:89-176**—Thank God for His Word and its good effects.
4. **John 1:1-18**—Reflect on how Jesus reveals God and clarifies Scripture.
5. **2 Timothy 3**—Commit to living and sharing God's Word in love.

## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *Personal Bible Study* by The Training Center
- **Intermediate:** *Eat This Book* by Eugene Peterson
- **Advanced:** *Grasping God's Word* by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

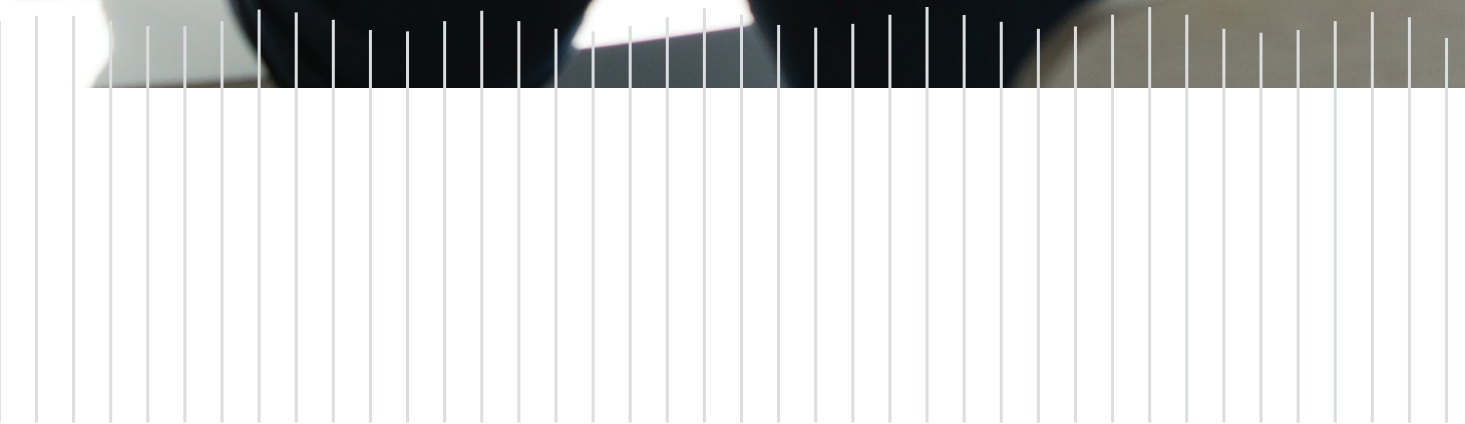
## NOTES



## NOTES



# Confession



## CHAPTER SIX

# Confession

IMAGINE A TODDLER THAT JUST GOT CAUGHT RED-HANDED doing something they were told not to do. What are some of the toddler's tactics in that situation? One might try to bargain or make a deal. Another might try to act like they are completely oblivious. Still another may lie or blame someone or something else. Some might even go so far as to throw a temper tantrum or even try to hide by closing their eyes as tightly as possible. Just because the toddler can't see the parent doesn't mean the parent can't see exactly what is going on.

If only we all grew out of these toddler tactics, especially in our relationship with God. **Despite knowing God sees and knows all things, the temptation remains to close our eyes tightly in a futile attempt to hide.** We are not alone; in our world today it seems that truth and justice can be hard to come by. Courtroom and detective dramas abound in our culture where authorities pursue criminals who are running and hiding and trying to cover up their tracks. More often than we would like to admit, noteworthy people in positions of influence are caught up in public scandals they hoped would never come to light.

What if God were to swear you into His court as a witness? *"Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth with My help?"* What would you say? Many saints have said, "yes." In fact, they make it a consistent rhythm of life to review their day and confess any sinful thought, feeling, action, or reaction they can remember. Why? Their view of God is far from a detective busting through a door with gun drawn and handcuffs ready. Instead, they view God as a loving father who wants to forgive and help them walk away from sin that leads to death, to walk toward trust and obedience that leads to life. They have good reason from God's Word to take this view.

### 1 John 1:9

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

**To confess in this verse means to "agree with God."** God wants us to grow into the kind of honest, authentic people who can tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth with His help. He desires for us to be free from the masks we wear and our toddler tactics. He desires for us to experience His complete forgiveness and cleansing. In fact, when we make confession a regular rhythm in life, we can enjoy a loving relationship with our forgiving, cleansing Heavenly Father.

What do we agree with God about? We agree with God about our sin—any way that we fall short of His glory, good design, and good ways. We agree with God about His character. In 1 John 1:9, we see that God is a faithful, just, forgiving, and cleansing God. The rest of Scripture shows even more glories and wonders of His perfect, holy character. We also agree with God about the blessings and benefits of His redemptive work. In Him we are forgiven and clean—completely so.

**The Christian faith actually begins with confession** of our need for God and dependence on Him. Romans 10:9-10 states, *“If you declare with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”* Confession not only begins, but also sustains, our relationship with God. Confession is also meant to be an ongoing rhythm in our spiritual lives, as well. We confess—we agree with God—on a regular basis about our sins, His character, and the good news that He has offered and we receive. We also confess to one another:

**James 5:16**

*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*

A truly wonderful thing happens as we explore and engage this spiritual rhythm of confession in everyday life: spiritual formation. The Holy Spirit forms us to be like Jesus, to the pleasure and glory of God the Father.

**2 Corinthians 3:18**

*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

Not only do we receive forgiveness, cleansing, and healing through confession, but also God makes us like Jesus—forgivers, cleansers, and healers.

Imagine how that would revolutionize a person’s mind, heart, soul, and life.

**Those who consistently confess to trusted friends and to Jesus Christ, the Wounded Healer, become wounded healers in their everyday life.** Imagine how that would revolutionize a marriage, a community, a neighborhood, Northwest Arkansas, and the nations. A movement of people who know they have been caught red-handed, run to the nailed-pierced hands of Jesus, and run with His forgiving, cleansing, and healing heart to the hurting and hiding in the world.

*“Confession begins in sorrow, but it ends in joy. There is celebration in the forgiveness of sins because it results in a genuinely changed life.”*

—Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

*“At the heart of God is the desire to give and to forgive. Because of this, He set into motion the entire redemptive process that culminated in the cross and was confirmed in the resurrection... This was His highest and most holy work, the work that makes confession and the forgiveness of sins possible.”*

—Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

*“Through Christ men could be sinners and only so could they be helped. All sham was ended in the presence of Christ... Wherever the message of the crucified Christ is a vital, living thing, there brotherly confession will also avail.”*

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

## PROCESS

**Read Psalm 51.** Use these questions to help you consider the spiritual rhythm of confession this week, individually and with others.

- How does the psalmist King David describe his sin and its effects?
- How does David appeal to God's character for help? How does he pray for forgiveness and cleansing?
- Where does joy and praise come from in this passage?
- What would it sound like to put this psalm in your own words? Following David's example, take some time to write a prayer of confession.
- How did you sense God working as you confessed and prayed?

## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in the spiritual rhythm of confession.

1. **Psalm 51**—Put this psalm in your own words and pray to God.
2. **Psalm 32**—Notice the effects of hidden sin versus confessed sin.
3. **1 John 1:5-2:6**—Notice how Christ brings confession and life change.
4. **James 5:13-20**—Confess and pray with a trusted spiritual leader.
5. **Romans 12:9-21**—Choose to forgive and overcome evil with good.



## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *Life's Healing Choices* by John Baker
- **Intermediate:** *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- **Advanced:** *Counterfeit Gods* by Tim Keller

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

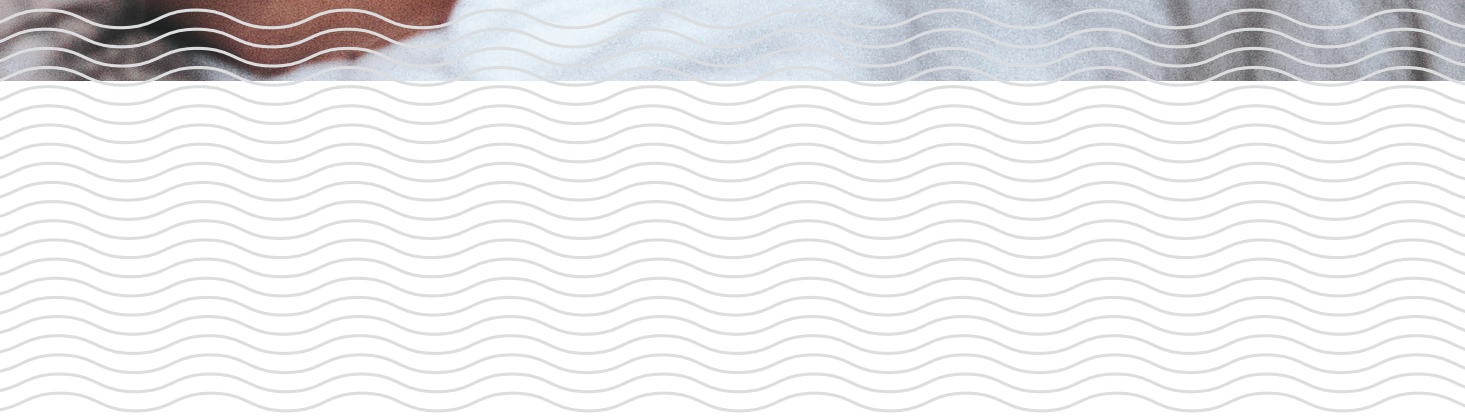
## NOTES

## NOTES





## Solitude + Silence



## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Solitude + Silence

“SOLITUDE IS THE FURNACE OF TRANSFORMATION.” —Henri Nouwen

Many find the practice of being alone to be one of the hardest and scariest discipline of all. This goes beyond being introverted or extroverted. In a digitally distracted age, often an introvert spends time alone with “others” through screens and noise. The stillness and quiet of being alone can create an anxiety and restlessness that reveals a deeper lack of contentment. **Even the most committed follower of Jesus, committed to the church and acts of service, may come to realize they have perfected living for God but do not know how to live with God.** The remedy is a needed practice of stopping, learning to hear His voice, and creating sacred spaces of solitude and silence.

By reading the gospel of Mark we see examples of how solitude and silence were foundational to Jesus’ life and ministry. In Mark 1:12, Jesus goes into the wilderness. In Mark 1:35-39, Jesus rises early the next morning to go to a solitary place and pray. In Mark 6, Jesus calls a few friends together to go to a quiet place and rest. In Mark 9, Jesus takes three of his closest friends to a mountain where they experience the overwhelming presence of God.

Throughout the Bible and church history, the practice of solitude has repeatedly demonstrated its benefit to the spiritual life. Some people stumble into solitude after a crisis, however intentionally **setting aside time to practice solitude and silence creates sustainability for living a life connected with God.**

*“Solitude is the most central of the disciplines of abstinence. The reason is simple: Solitude makes the spiritual life possible because in it we are freed from the bondage to people and our inner compulsions, and we are freed to love God and know compassion for others.”*

—Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

*“Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and place for God, and for him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists but also that he is actively present in our lives—healing, teaching, and guiding—we need to set aside a time and space to give him our undivided attention.”*

—Henri Nouwen, *The Spiritual Life: Eight Essential Titles*



There are two common barriers that hinder us from entering into solitude and silence. The first one is that we need a fuller understanding of the discipline. A verse that is one of the easiest to quote but the hardest to practice is: *Be still, and know that I am God* (Psalm 46:10). We must not confuse “*be still and know*” with “*go isolate yourself and shut up*.” Isolation and only hearing our own voice only spins us in circles. That said, solitude without guidance can be confusing. **Solitude is not about learning to be alone; solitude is learning to be alone *with* God. In the same manner, silence is not just learning to be quiet. The practice of silence is learning to listen to His voice (John 10:27).**

A second barrier is the fear of facing ourselves. Some may use busyness to avoid facing unpleasant thoughts and feelings. Insecurities and fears can be stuffed down through constant noise and activity.

*“This is precisely why solitude is such a fundamental discipline of the spiritual life. As long as we are at the center of the action, we feel indispensable... But genuine experiences of solitude undercut all the pretense. In the very act of retreat we resign as CEO of the universe. We entrust people into the hands of God.”*

—Richard Foster

Solitude helps us to see a complete picture of who we are with God. Just ourselves—not the people who surround us or the people we surround ourselves with.

To start practicing this rhythm, **begin where you are.** As you begin practicing solitude and silence, you do not need begin with a 24 or 72-hour retreat. You may just begin with five to ten minutes, or even sitting still with no noise at a stoplight for two minutes. The point is to practice setting aside time alone and turning the noise down to begin hearing His voice. You will gradually increase your solitude and silence over time with certain daily, weekly, and yearly times of retreat as the practice continues.

**Identify a sacred space.** Do you have a favorite chair or spot in your home? Some even love sitting in their car with the windows down at their favorite park. There is no need to find a certain spot an hour away in the mountains or by a stream, although that is wonderful at times. Simply find a spot that is safe, quiet, and peaceful where you can consistently return.

**End your time with reflection.** How was your experience with solitude? Are there any shifts or changes that have taken place? Is there anything you know more clearly? Is there any guidance or invitation from God?

*"Solitude is a place of purification and transformation,  
a place of great struggle and great encounter... where  
Christ models us in His own image and frees us from the  
victimizing compulsions of the world."*

–Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*

*"Let him who cannot be alone beware of community.  
Let him who is not in community beware of being  
alone... One who wants fellowship without solitude  
plunges into the void of mindless chatter, and the one  
who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the  
abyss of self-infatuation and despair."*

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*





## PROCESS

**Read Matthew 11:25-28.** Use these questions to help you consider the spiritual rhythms of solitude and silence this week, individually and with others.

- In what areas of life do you feel especially hurried or tired?
- When was the last time you remember experiencing peace and quiet with God that refreshed you in strength and perspective? Describe it.
- What kind of places help you settle down and experience quiet refreshment?
- What would it look like to visit and revisit a place like that in the rhythm of your everyday life for peace and quiet? Be realistic.
- After some quiet, write and say a prayer surrendering your burdens and relying on the strength and perspective of God.

## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in the spiritual rhythms of solitude and silence.

1. **Matthew 11:25-28**—Let God help you exchange hurry for true rest.
2. **Mark 1:35-39**—In solitude take notice of the load you are carrying. Recognize your need for solitude.
3. **Psalm 46**—Schedule short breaks to breathe and be aware of God.
4. **Psalm 131**—Use moments of silence to fuel humility and hope.
5. **Mark 9:2-8**—Schedule a personal retreat, quietly listening to Jesus.

## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton
- **Intermediate:** *The Way of the Heart* by Henri Nouwen
- **Advanced:** *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

## NOTES

## NOTES





# Worship + Celebration



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Worship + Celebration

WORSHIP HAS A VARIETY OF EXPRESSIONS depending on culture, personality, or even context. At its root, worship is some form of declaration or acknowledgment of someone's or something's value to the worshiper.

It has been observed that it is our nature to be worshipers. Throughout history, in all cultures and in all places, we find evidence of some form of worship. Does this indicate that woven into our design, perhaps in our very DNA, is the propensity, even the need to worship? Regardless, the Bible gives us parameters that help form our understanding of God-honoring worship.

**Worship is an appropriate response to God revealing Himself.** In other words, if we are going to worship God, we must first “see” Him. There are many ways God has revealed Himself to us, and the primary one is through His Word. That explains why when God's people have gathered to worship together throughout the ages, a central part of the gathering is reading and teaching the Bible.

God also reveals something of Himself through His creation. When you look into the amazing vastness of both “outer” space and “inner” space you can see the handiwork of a creative and magnificent God, whose power and knowledge is immeasurable. When you look at people, you see something of God's “image” in them and you see a God who is personal and relational.

God also reveals Himself through His actions. When you look at how God deals with His people, how He interacts with creation throughout history, and how He acts and moves to make things happen, you see a God who is involved and engaged, who is purposeful and intentional.

**If worship begins with God's revelation, you can see that worship can take place anywhere**—from a gathering with other followers of Christ, to a history class, to a walk in the park, to sitting and rocking a tiny baby. Any time and any place we “see” God, we can worship.



Since worship is an appropriate response to God revealing Himself, we must now consider our response. Any time God reveals Himself, we will respond in some way. It may be to ignore it, to explain it away, to take credit for it ourselves—all of which would not be worship.

There are many ways we can respond appropriately to God's revelation and worship Him. We can praise Him, adore Him, love Him, submit to Him, confess our sins to Him, declare our utter dependence on Him, and many other responses. We can even do these in a variety of ways. We can sing, dance, pray, give, serve, and share His goodness with others. **Any response that acknowledges and declares His worthiness and value is an act of worship.**

With so many ways to worship, how might we establish a rhythm of being worshipers? We need to place ourselves in a position to "see" God's revelation. That is one reason the writer of Hebrews encourages his readers to make a practice of gathering with other believers (Hebrews 10:25). That is why we gather each week with God's people around God's Word.

As one person observed, if we are not worshiping during the week, we are not likely to be worshiping on the weekend. So we must also purposefully place ourselves where we can see God's revelation throughout our day. That can be as simple as developing the practice of "looking" for God as you go throughout the day. Or as you come to the end of your day, do a quick review and assessment of all you experienced and ask God to show you how He was present in your day.

**Then as you see God's revelation of Himself, respond.** Perhaps it is with a whispered prayer of thanks, or maybe you just break out in a song of praise.

*"The Presence of God is the concentration of the soul's attention on God, remembering that He is always present."*

—Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

*"...it is in the process of being worshiped that God communicates His presence to men."*

—C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*

## PROCESS

**Read Romans 12:1-2 and Hebrews 13:15-16.** Use these questions to help you consider the spiritual rhythms of worship and celebration this week, individually and with others.

- Consider Jesus' mercy and sacrifice. How do these inspire us to worship and celebrate Him?
- How do we respond to Christ's sacrifice with our own spiritual sacrifices of worship?
- What do these sacrifices of worship look like when we gather for worship services together? What about personally in everyday life?
- What would it look like for you to take a step of growth in worshiping and celebrating God as an everyday lifestyle?

## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in the spiritual rhythms of worship and celebration.

1. **Romans 12:1-2**—Ask God to guide you to worship in all areas of your life.
2. **Hebrews 13:15-16**—Consciously choose to praise God and serve others throughout the day as an act of worship.
3. **1 Corinthians 10:31**—Practice being prayerful and aware of God's blessing throughout meals.
4. **Colossians 3:15-17**—Practice saying, “*Thank You*” to God for every blessing you notice throughout the day.
5. **John 4:1-42**—Ask God to give you a true, growing heart of worship.

## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *Sacred Pathways* by Gary Thomas
- **Intermediate:** *Worship* by A.W. Tozer
- **Advanced:** *Unceasing Worship* by Harold Best

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

## NOTES

## NOTES





# Sabbath



## CHAPTER NINE

# Sabbath

THERE'S A COMMON CLICHÉ one often hears among the everyday banter in our culture. Ask someone, “*How are you?*” and you’re likely to get one of two answers. “*Fine,*” or more often now, “*Busy!*” That’s generally followed by a conversational one-upmanship as we compare how busy we all are. Why has this become expected small talk? Because we *are* busy!

How do we go beyond talking about our lives in terms that are bigger than busyness and activity? There’s a consistent answer found in the Bible. It’s a simple way, but not an easy way.

*Sabbath.* Yes, Sabbath.

What is Sabbath? Sabbath goes back to the dawn of time, when the human race first entered the rat race. It comes from the Hebrew word, *Shabbat*, which means “rest, cease.” To sabbath is to stop. We see it in the opening of God’s story:

### Genesis 2:1-3

*Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.  
² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so  
on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³ Then God blessed the  
seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work  
of creating that he had done.*

The creation week includes seven days, even though the creating was done in six. The efficiency expert in us says, “*Cut a day.*” Yet God chooses to write a seventh day of rest... a Shabbat... into the story. Why? God did not need rest. He is not taking a day off. In fact, the Sabbath is a full day. It was a special day where God delighted in His work. The seventh day is a full day of joyful rest. Again, why?

Because God is not a machine who exists merely to produce. And we, who are made in His image, are not machines who exist to produce. God is a lover and a worker who purposefully stopped to enjoy His creative work. In *His* creation story, we get *our* rhythm of life.

Man and woman were made on the sixth day of creation and given a command to work the garden. Yet God declared a Sabbath rest on the seventh day. So what did

Adam and Eve do on their first day of life? They rested with God. They enjoyed *His* work. Then out of that rest, out of delighting in *His* work, Adam and Eve began *their* work in the garden. We see our rhythm of life here. **We don't just rest from our work. We work from our rest.**

Fast forward from the Genesis creation story to the second book of the Bible, Exodus. God called a nation, Israel, to have a special relationship with Him. They slaved without rest for 400 years under Egyptian rule. God delivered them miraculously, led them to Mt. Sinai, and gave them a new way of living called the Ten Commandments.

#### **Exodus 20:8-11**

*“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”*

Rest is God's fourth commandment, not His fourth good suggestion. We would never treat the command not to murder as optional, but we tend to treat the command for Sabbath rest like it is just good advice from our dentist.

Israel's leaders tried to ensure obedience to the Law by spelling out what constituted work. By the time of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees had so clarified rest that their laws were an exhausting burden. Into this, Jesus says—***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”*** (Matthew 11:28).

To be clear, everything in the Old Testament, including the Law, points to Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of the Law. Therefore, in Christ, we have been freed from a religious system of keeping the Sabbath day. We are no longer tied to a specific seventh day of rest (which is Saturday for Jews).

However, we fool ourselves when we think we no longer need a regular rhythm of rest! Our modern practice of vacation is not an adequate replacement. (So often we have said, *“I need a vacation!”* right after a vacation.) Not only that, the math doesn't work. We can't make 14 days of vacation equate to 52 days of rest. We still need a weekly rhythm of rest.

**So, why Sabbath?** God gives us two main reasons for His command to take a weekly rhythm of rest. First, ***Sabbath is a reminder:***

**Exodus 31:13b**

*“You must observe my Sabbaths... so you may know that I am the LORD who makes you holy.”*

A rhythm of rest pushes the pause button on life and reminds us that we don’t hold things together; God does. He is the center of our life and work. Second, ***Sabbath is a refresher.***

**Exodus 23:12a**

*“Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest...”*

We don’t live well without regular reminders and refreshment from God. Without them, life begins to look frazzled and distracted. Even worse, we add church stuff into our schedules. Sabbath is God’s antidote to hurry and worry. It’s a reminder that cures worry and a refresher that cures hurry.

**How do we observe the Sabbath?** Here’s the great thing about being free from the religious burden of Law—we have freedom in how to practice God’s rhythm of rest. Some may begin Sabbath when the workday ends on Friday through Saturday evening. Others may choose to make Sunday a day of rest. We have lots of flexibility in how to rest, as long as we make sure to rest.

Psalms 92 is the only psalm that specifically states that it is for the Sabbath. It has insights in how we can do sabbath-rest well.

**Psalms 92:1-2**

*It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name,  
O Most High, <sup>2</sup> proclaiming your love in the morning and your  
faithfulness at night...*

We see two main activities here—**pray and play**. Godly rest includes reflecting on the goodness of God: prayer. It also includes leisure that refreshes: play. Both are part of Sabbath rest. Notice it lasts for the whole day: morning to night. According to God, this makes for “good” rest!

Haven’t you seen that too? Take the joy and fun out of a day of rest and it kills the gift. Yet make rest all about frantic recreation and it leaves you exhausted. We need both prayer and play in order to be reminded and refreshed. That’s a life-giving rhythm!

*"Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day.  
You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life... give  
yourself the gift of an unhurried day."*

*—Dallas Willard in Soul Keeping*

*"The soul craves rest. The soul knows only borrowed  
strength. The soul was made to rest in God the way a  
tree rests in soil."*

*—John Ortberg, Soul Keeping*



## PROCESS

**Read Psalm 92.** Use these questions to help you consider the spiritual rhythm of Sabbath this week, individually and with others.

- What stands out to you about this “song for the Sabbath?”
- Who is God in this psalm and how is He celebrated?
- How is it significant that God’s work is celebrated in this song of rest?
- Why is it important to trust God’s victory over evil in a day of rest?
- What are all the benefits of God, His work, and our rest in this psalm?
- What would it look like to give yourself an “unhurried day” using this psalm as a guide and encouragement?

## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in the spiritual rhythm of Sabbath.

1. **Psalms 92**—Ask God to assess your rhythm of rest.
2. **Genesis 2:1-3**—Notice God setting the rhythm for work and rest.
3. **Exodus 20:8-11**—Notice God commanding His people to follow His rhythm of work and rest.
4. **Exodus 31:12-16, 23:12**—Notice God's purpose for the Sabbath rhythm.
5. **Matthew 11:28-30**—Use a day of rest to remember Jesus and be refreshed through recreation in an unhurried, work-free way.

## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *Soul Keeping* by John Ortberg
- **Intermediate:** *The Rest of God* by Mark Buchanan
- **Advanced:** *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

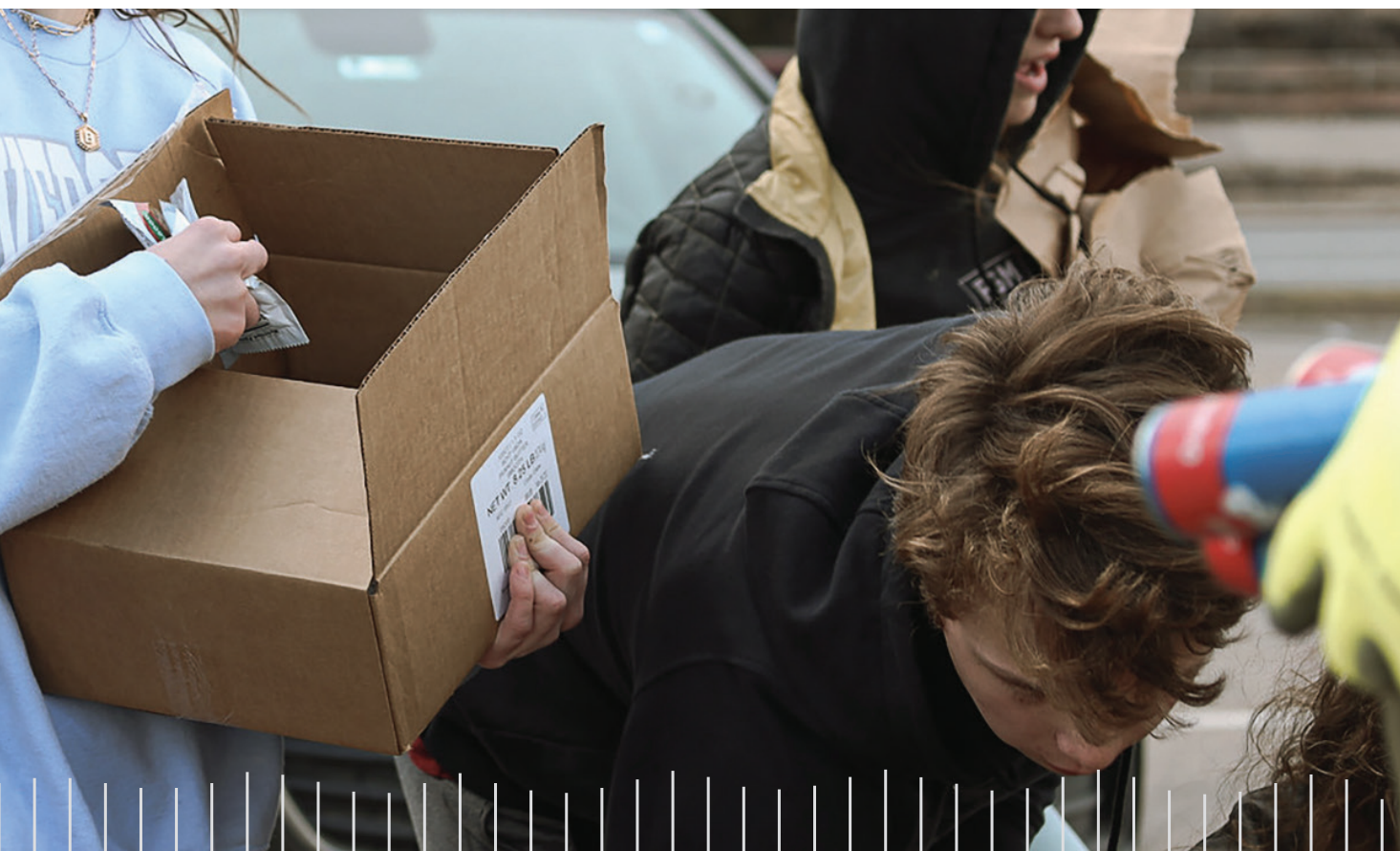
*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*



## NOTES



# Service



## CHAPTER TEN

### Service

DRIVE THROUGH ANY SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD and you'll often see banners of all kinds flying outside the front door. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, you'll see an American flag; at Christmas, a holiday banner; during summer, a bright, outdoorsy banner; and during football season, a Razorback or NFL team.

Perhaps there is another banner that Christ-followers can fly outside our homes—a dirty towel.

#### John 13:3-5

*Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; <sup>4</sup> so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.*

*<sup>5</sup> After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

Did you catch the connection between “known power” and a dirty towel? The Son of God knew His position of supreme authority, so He used that authority to serve the needs of others with less power. He met practical needs by serving in the most practical way, even when it required Him to take the role of the lowest servant. Only the lowest servant in the household organizational chart had to wash dirty feet before a meal.

If spiritual formation is the process of the Spirit of God transforming us into the likeness of the Son of God, then **service has to be one of our essential practices.** If we are to become more like Jesus, serving must be part of our spiritual rhythms. That was Jesus' conviction.

#### John 13:12-15

*When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. <sup>13</sup> “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”*

Just like it's hard to picture a Christ who didn't serve others, it's hard to imagine a Christ-follower who does not serve others. He is *the* Servant. He calls us to become more like Him in the rhythm of our life. The New Testament tells us that our service

will look different from one another, depending upon our spiritual gifting and our life's season and assignment. But one thing we all have in common, we are people who joyfully and willingly fly a dirty towel as the banner of our lives.

That's why service must be one of the rhythms we pursue in the Christian life. It's too tempting to view service like the non-Christ-following world we live in. Service projects during the holidays or after natural disasters are helpful and needed, **but a healthy routine of serving someone else as a lifestyle is the way of the Christ-follower.** We don't do this out of grim duty. We do this out of contented desire, because we believe what Jesus said about serving others.

#### **John 13:16-17**

*"Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."*

Jesus has our good in mind. That's why He calls us to serve the way He did. He knows the road to blessing is paved by generously serving others. He must have said this so often that Paul tells church elders, **"...the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:35b).**

How is serving a blessing? Clearly, it makes you feel good to know you helped someone, and while that's true, God has so much more in store for us than that.

**A lifestyle of serving others cultivates humility in us.** As Ignatius said, *"Humility is the mother of all other virtue."* Out of a humble heart flow the fruits of gratitude, worship, love, contentment, joy, and peace. God promises to give grace to the humble (see Luke 1:48, James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5). No wonder Jesus promises we will be blessed if we serve others!

Our Savior is *the* Servant... continually. He served us ultimately as He carried our cross and paid for our sin. He serves us continually as He sits upon His glorious throne. He serves us even when He calls us to serve as He served.

#### **1 Peter 4:10-11**

***Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. <sup>11</sup> If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.***

**Jesus serves us as we serve others!** Through service, He calls us to a greater and more blessed life. And then He serves us by supplying the energy to carry out this call.

There's much more we could say about service as a spiritual discipline. But it's clear that it's the path that Jesus walked, called us to walk, and empowers us to walk. No wonder serving is one of the rhythms that the Holy Spirit uses to make us more like Jesus.

A dirty towel as home décor doesn't seem so bizarre now, does it?

*“The majority of the issues that our community is facing would be eliminated or drastically reduced if we could figure out a way to become a community of great neighbors...’ In a word, our mayor invited a roomful of pastors to get their people to actually obey Jesus’ Great Commandment.”*

—Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*

*“Poverty alleviation occurs when the power of Christ’s resurrection reconciles our key relationships through the transformation of both individual lives and local, national, and international systems.”*

—Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*

## PROCESS

**Read Mark 10:35-45.** Use these questions to help you consider the spiritual rhythm of service this week, individually and with others.

- How do the disciples define success and greatness?
- How does Jesus redefine greatness? Why is this significant and meaningful in our day and age?
- What examples can you think of where Jesus served others?
- What could it look like for you to have a rhythm of Christ-like service in your life?  
How can you grow in true greatness?

## PRACTICE

Below is a scripture reading plan for the week with some practical suggestions to help you grow in the spiritual rhythm of service.

1. **Mark 10:35-45**—Ask God to assess your view of success and service.
2. **1 Peter 4:7-11**—Notice what God has given you so that you can serve others.
3. **Mark 12:28-34**—Love a neighbor by sharing something or serving an everyday need.
4. **1 Thessalonians 5:14**—Ask God to bring someone in need to mind and practically serve them today.
5. **Luke 10:25-37**—Be generous and show someone the extravagant love of Christ.



## RESOURCES

- **Introductory:** *Improving Your Serve* by Charles Swindoll
- **Intermediate:** *The Art of Neighboring* by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon
- **Advanced:** *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert

## PROGRESS

Remember, the goal is that all of us would choose one or two spiritual rhythms in which to take a step of growth. **Progress is the goal.**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

## NOTES

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