

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES—101

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINES FOR YOUTH MINISTRY Scott Nelson

Every summer I take students from our church on what I call an “Intensive”—a twenty-four-hour study on the last hours of Christ’s life. We look at the closing act of Christ’s life, getting a deeper insight into the characters that surrounded him, and into the significance of the words he left with us—words that change our lives.

During our Intensive, I also introduce the students to spiritual practices (or disciplines). Spiritual practices are simply a way to pray. They are called practices because they need to be practiced regularly to really have an impact on our spiritual formation.

Spiritual practices are easy—and hard. They are easy because they are natural; God made us to pray this way. They are easy because they require very little explanation; you learn the practices as you practice them.

The practices are hard because they demand that we slow down. Honestly, our time is the thing most of us hold back from God. But as Richard Foster said in *Celebration of Discipline*, “The person who does not seek the kingdom first does not seek it at all.”

The practices are prayer, and prayer is a relationship with our loving Father. A relationship requires time more than almost any ingredient. When I take the students on the Intensive I take them camping—out of town and away from their cell phones, email, CD players, and schedules. It is hard to hear the still, small voice of God when life is a

frantic, rat-racing dash.

On the Intensive I introduce students to these six spiritual practices: silence, meditation, lectio divina, observation, thanksgiving, and confession.

Silence

My dad taught me, “When you are talking to someone wiser than you, it is best to keep silent.” We believe that God is wiser than we are, and yet most of us spend all our prayer time talking. Silence is hard, especially for teenagers. We live in a loud world, full of noise and distractions. Many fear boredom above all else, and fill up their lives with endless activities and entertainment. The practice of silence calls us away from the diversions and into a relationship with God.

Silence is simple: don’t talk. Listen to God. To start, I give the students ten minutes to sit in silence and listen to God. I advise them not to talk back to God; just listen. It is important to be alone, for the noise of someone shifting is often enough to distract a prayer of silence. Again and again students have come back to me, amazed that they actually heard God speaking to them. The Lord whispers his thoughts about their lives, their relationships, and their walk with him. Students never feel hurt, though many of them feel convicted. There is so much power in simply spending time with our loving Savior.

Meditation

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was once asked why he meditated. He replied, “Because I am a Christian.”

Meditation should not be foreign to Christians, for it is mentioned often in the Bible. Psalm 48:9 says, “Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love” (NIV). Christians in the West are often afraid of meditation, fearing New Age mysticism. Christian meditation, though, is not about emptying the mind or detaching from reality—it is about filling the mind with the Holy Spirit and attaching to God, the center of reality itself.

Meditation is focused thought. In meditation, a person focuses their thought on God. Moses prayed, “Let me see your glorious presence” (Exodus 33:18, NLT). Meditation allows students to pray with their imagination, to focus all their heart, soul, and mind on the Holy One, and to see God’s glory.

Meditation is best done in a comfortable posture where constant shifting is not necessary. The act of breathing becomes a symbol of breathing in and being filled with God’s presence.

We practice meditation for about ten minutes and then share our prayers. Some students have told me that they love meditation the most of these six practices. I encourage them to continue to practice meditation, to make it a habit that can form their prayer life and relationship with God.

Lectio Divina

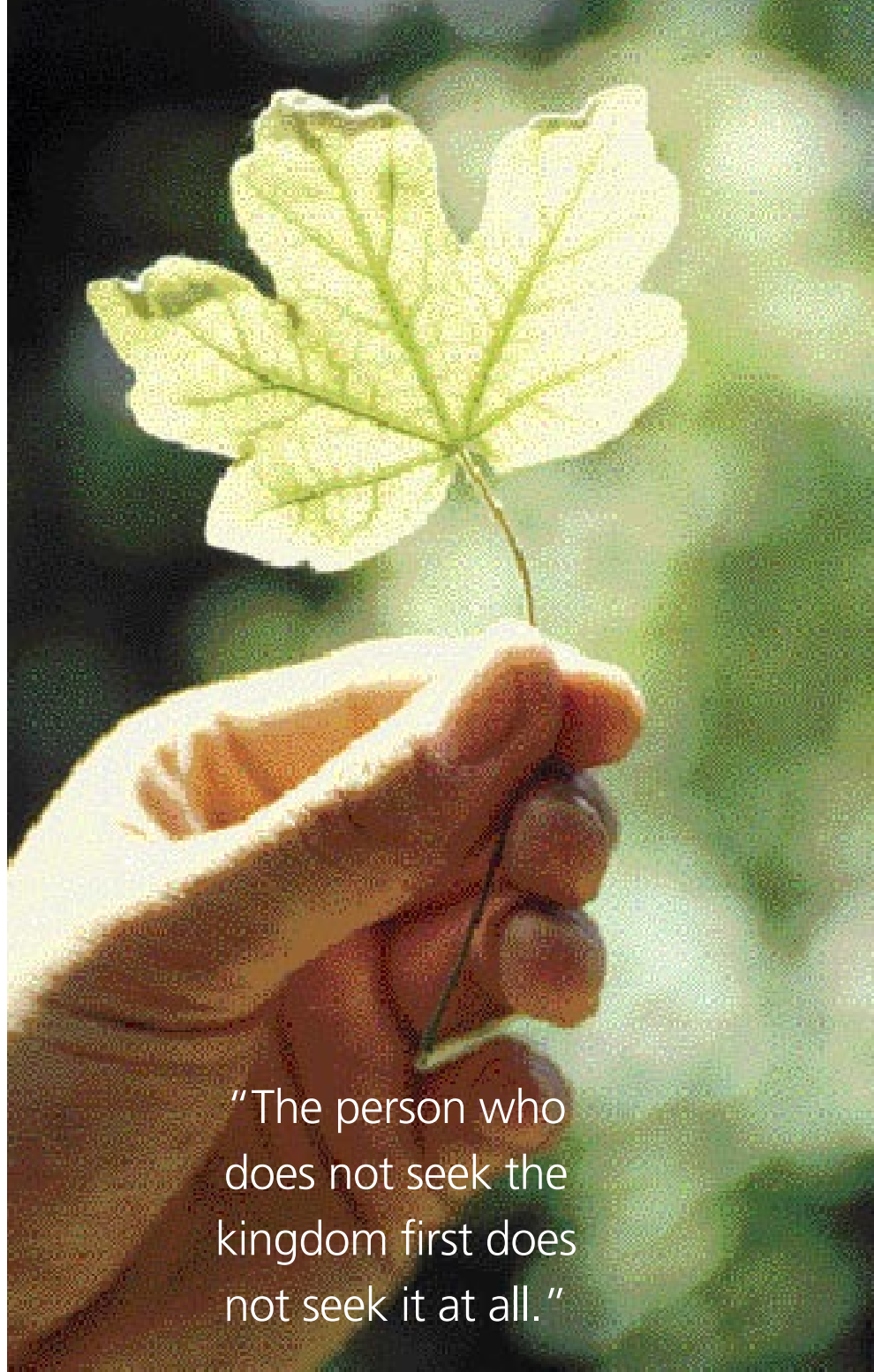
Put simply, lectio divina is meditating on the Bible. Moses told Joshua, "Study this Book of the Law continually. Meditate on it day and night so you may be sure to obey all that is written in it" (Joshua 1:8, NLT). So often we read through Scripture in a rush, rarely pausing to think about what the holy words mean and almost never stopping to really reflect. These are the words of life, and they call for our time. They call for meditation to allow their power to permeate the walls of our heart.

I begin by giving the students a passage to read. As a group we silently read through the passage. Some students read the whole thing then go back more slowly to reflect, some never make it to the end. The point is not to finish, but to focus. Students are instructed to find one phrase, or even one key word, and to just continually meditate on it. After ten minutes, I ask the students to share their experience, and have been amazed at the depth of theological insight that has come from the meditation of teenagers. They share what God taught them, and they teach each other.

Lectio divina is so powerful and simple that I have begun to use it during our Sunday morning program. We read a passage, and then the students sit with the text for ten minutes to think about it—ponder it, understand it, and apply it to their lives. I don't have to tell them what to think about the Bible; God gave them minds and hearts to meditate upon his holy word. When they do this I rarely have to add anything; all of my seminary training falls aside next to the gentle teaching hand of Jesus.

Observation

When I was in high school, my youth pastor challenged me to rethink the way I saw school: all true learning is learning about God. In biology I can learn theology, for I am learning about the way the Creator made the world. English, math, history, and science give insights into the mind and ways of the Lord.



"The person who does not seek the kingdom first does not seek it at all."

In Proverbs 6 we are told, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest" (vv. 6-8, NIV). Jesus tells his followers to consider the birds and the flowers, to learn lessons about God from nature (Luke 12:24, 27).

Observation is another form of meditation, where thought is focused on creation. There is so much to learn

all around us, if we take the time to see. The complexity of a leaf can make the mind pause and give praise to God. The beauty of a flower can make the heart wonder. Trees can teach us. As they lift up their branches to the sun, their source, so must we lift ourselves up to our true source—God, the well-spring of life.

The students take a twenty to thirty

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minute walk during our time together. They go alone, and take time to observe creation and learn about the Creator. We are camping, so the examples are plentiful. But observation is a practice that can be done anywhere. Go to a park or a zoo, or just watch the clouds go by. There is something powerful, and friendly, about taking a walk with Jesus and watching as he points out some lesson from creation for you to learn. Theology is learned in more places than books.

Thanksgiving

Near the end of the Intensive we come to a point of pause. We have just studied the sleepless night, abandonment, betrayal, trial, scourging, and crucifixion of Jesus. It is time to give thanks.

The prayer time is simple; together we offer up prayers of thanks to our loving Abba. We begin by focusing on the cross and our salvation. We then thank God for who he is and what he has done in our lives. Then we thank God for all the things we have and for all the opportunities he has given us. I give the students only one instruction: don't stop thanking God. We have so much to be thankful for; we just don't recognize it.

Thanksgiving is a practice that can change your life; it is a 24/7 prayer that transforms a person's entire perspective. Thomas Erskine said, "Religion is grace, and ethics is gratitude." For a Christian, thanksgiving is not just a prayer before meals but the motivation that drives obedience. Following Jesus is not drudgery but a joy—but only for those who realizes the danger they were saved from.

I encourage teenagers to make thanksgiving a regular practice in their life. I tell them to write notes of thanksgiving to God and stick them on their walls and in their lockers. I recommend journaling to them—to fill up pages with thanksgiving to God. There is nothing like gratitude to strengthen a relationship. Spiritual practices are all



about loving God and loving others. Thanksgiving takes a seed of love and bursts it into bloom.

Confession

There is nothing so missing in prayer today as confession. Accountability is apparently absent from the lives of many Christians. According to Mark, the first words of Jesus's public ministry are, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15, NIV).

The message of repentance, so central to Jesus's teaching, flies in the face of the media message of entitlement. The world's message is clear—you have a right to sin, and no one should tell you otherwise. Confession helps us confront and weed out sin—especially and primarily the sin that has found a home in our own hearts.

Learning about God should lead us to humility. As we close our time together, we practice a prayer of confession. We pray silently in a group, and then the students confess to one another. They first confess sins they have struggled with recently. Then there may be a time of inner silence, which is fine as long as they will listen to the voice of God. The Spirit often reveals hidden sins as the students begin thinking about different areas of their lives. After our silent time ends, I allow some time for sharing. Once the first student speaks, all the walls come down as more and more students reveal their own struggles with sin.

Confession is a somber time, and this is not a bad thing (2 Corinthians 7:10). Students on the Intensive have just been reminded of the price of sin, and the incredible weight of forgiveness. Confession is a hard time because

it calls us back to the truth—we are not worthy of the forgiveness that Christ grants us freely.

I close our time reading a pronouncement of God's forgiveness: "But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong" (1 John 1:9, NLT). This pronouncement tells us who we are: not perfect people, and not people of sin. We are forgiven people, meant to live renewed lives as children of the King. The spiritual practice of confession should be part of our prayers every day.

There is no "Extreme Makeover: Soul Edition." Changing the inner life, the real person, takes time. The spiritual practices are focused on the inner life, and the change that needs to happen there. The practices are not "laws" to follow, but prayers to connect us closer to God so that he can change us from the inside out. They are hard because they stab at superficiality. Too often Christians wear a smile of spirituality while their souls are yearning for a vital relationship with the Creator. I have found that these practices catapult spiritual change in a teenager's life—transforming superficial faith into genuine love for Jesus.

Jesus was once asked what the most important commands for human life were. He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength," and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31, NIV). This is the heart of God, and the meaning of life. The spiritual practices are prayers to help us love God and others more. The spiritual practices are about grace; we must break the pattern of thought that God is pleased only when we do things for him. God is pleased to love us, and to be loved by us as we love others.

I invite you to practice these spiritual disciplines and more deeply experience the transforming love of God.

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