

“Using Spiritual Practices”

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Second in a series about *Discipleship Practices*

Romans 11.33-12.2

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If you're reading this online,
you can see the Scripture selections by [clicking here](#).

*Well before sunrise,
Jesus rose and went to a deserted place
where he could be alone in prayer.* (Mark 1:35)

*Jesus went out to the mountain to pray,
and he prayed to God all night long.* (Luke 6:12)

Jesus went up on the mountain by himself to pray. (Matthew 14:23)

*Once when Jesus was praying by himself,
the disciples joined him. . . .* (Luke 9:18)

*Jesus took Peter, John, and James,
and went up on a mountain to pray.* (Luke 9:28)

After praying, Jesus threw out the evil spirit. (Mark 9:29)

*Some people brought children to Jesus
so that he would place his hands on them and pray.* (Matthew 19:13)

*The night before his execution,
Jesus went to a garden and agonized in prayer.
(Matthew 26.36-46; Mark 14.32-42; Luke 22.39-46)*

*Earlier that evening, after supper,
Jesus “looked up to heaven and said,
“Father, the time has come.
Glorify your Son, so that the Son can glorify you. . . .”* (John 17.1)

*Jesus was praying in a certain place.
When he finished, one of his disciples said,
“Lord, teach us to pray. . . .”* (Luke 11.1)

Jesus is our master-teacher. We are his disciples, learning his life. Jesus prayed, all the time. So we can pray like him. That's the bullseye.

II

A bullseye is a target. It's the target we're aiming at. These days, we're looking at important practices that help us grow as Jesus' disciples. What makes us disciples? Jesus calls us. We are aware of how Jesus is present in our lives, with his love and power. His presence changes us. We begin reflecting his love, in who we are and how we live.¹

In their book called *Bullseye: Aiming to Follow Jesus*, Debbie Johnson and Jamie Holtom talk about 6 time-proven activities that the Holy Spirit uses to shape Jesus people.

- Using Spiritual Practices
- Worshipping Together Weekly
- Discovering Authentic Community
- Serving with Our Gifts
- Giving Generously
- Sharing Christ

We are delving into one of these. Today we're doing the first, *Using Spiritual Practices*.

III

We use that word "practice" in different ways.

We practise when we repeat an activity again and again to get better at it (such as practising free throws).

We practise when we pursue a profession (such as a doctor's practice).

We practise when we actively participate in our religious life (such as a "practising Jew").

We practise when we do something out of custom or habit (such as "it's his practice to begin the day with a coffee").

We practice when we actually do something, instead just thinking about it (things should work in practice, not just in theory).

A practice, then, is something we work at to get better, we repeat, it becomes regular, and we don't just think about it (or talk about it, or listen to sermons about it). We do it.

Spiritual practices are "*activities you can do in your day-to-day life to help you draw closer to God.*"

They are *activities*. These are things we do.

¹ Jamie Holtom and Debbie Johnson, *Bullseye: Aiming to Follow Jesus* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2015), p. 5.

We do them within our *day-to-day lives*. Spiritual practices are meant to be normal. They do not take us away from our day-to-day life. We do them in the midst of it.

We do spiritual practices within our day-to-day lives *to draw closer to God*. Their purpose is relationship, that fundamental and precious relationship you are made for with your Creator.

People use many spiritual practices. I want say a bit about one of them, prayer, and offer a tool you might use to help you pray.

IV

In the Bible reading we heard, Paul had been probing what God was doing. He was perplexed at it all. In the end, all he could do was celebrate God's mysterious, merciful love. Us too.

Then what do we do, in response to God's grace? Listen to how one modern interpreter, Eugene Peterson, put Paul's answer.

With God's help, take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. . . . [Fix] your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. . . . God brings the best out of you, developing well-formed maturity in you.²

Prayer brings your whole life before God.³ Your life is God's gift to you. Sharing it openly with God is your gift back.

Prayer fixes your attention on God.⁴ Focus on the One whom you are always with. Be attentive to how God is with you.

Prayer is an enjoyment of being with God.⁵ It's slowing down, creating space to simply savour God's Presence. God delights in you. Share in that delight.

Prayer changes you. Being alive to God makes a profound difference. God does not transform you away from who you are. Rather, God makes you more deeply who you truly are, who God made you to be at the core of your being.⁶

² Adapted from *The Message* translation of Romans 12.1-2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bullseye, 20.

⁵ Jamie Holtom describes his "go-go-go" personally, and how he was always rushing to do -things for God. Then he heard God whisper, "Why can't you just enjoy being with me." Ibid, 14.

⁶ The Greek word for transformation is *metamorphousthe*. It is a compound of two words. *Meta* means being changed after being with something or something, or as a result of that experience of being with. *Morpho* means something taking on the form that properly embodies its inner essence.

V

Inserted in your worship bulletin this morning is a guide for daily prayer. There are many, many excellent guides out there; this is just one. This one focuses on being aware, available and, especially, attentive to how God is present with you.

This could be useful at any time of the day. I think it would be especially helpful at mid-day or toward the end of the day, because it invites us to look back over things that have happened. It helps us remember and reflect on the normal things that happen, and the out-of-the-ordinary things that might intrude, happily or unhappily, and it helps us remember and reflect through the lense of God's Presence. Whenever you decide to do this, it helps to be consistent; you might set a reminder for yourself.

As you see, it has seven steps. The first three bring us into the prayer time.

Still. Slow down, clear things away for a bit, and create space for God. Focus on God, by breathing in and out some simple words. Take your time with this step.

Trust. Remember who God is, and God's love for you. You can trust God.

Ask. There are simple words there you can say, silently or out loud. There is nothing magic about them. Use whatever words help you.

The next steps are the centre of the prayer time.

Sense. Ask God to show you how God was present with you through the times that have just happened. Maybe you sensed God, or were aware of God. Maybe you did not. No matter, God was still there.

Savour. Take time to enjoy that God is with you, and how God is with you. Enjoy who God is.

Then, think about **Sharing**. This can be hard for us. We're taught spirituality is a personal thing, and of course it is. But it's not secretive. Finding ways to share your experience of God strengthens your faith, and encourages others.

Finally, as you prepare to **Leave** this time, the last step prepares you for God's Presence in what lies ahead.

VI

Confession time. I'm not very good at this. Keeping a regular spiritual practice has always been a challenge for me.

I like the bullseye. It's a target to aim for. As I said last week, it's not about being perfect. It is about getting closer to the target as we go along. Sometimes we'll miss completely, but there is always the next dart to throw.

Here's a target for you this week: use this spiritual practice of daily prayer, every day. That's my target. Next Sunday, we'll see how we've done.

I'll finish with this. It's something written by Dallas Willard, who was a philosopher and writer about spirituality. It reminds us, not of what we should do or what we need to aim for. This is who we already are.

You are an unceasing spiritual being, created for an intimate and transforming friendship with the creative Community that is the Trinity.⁷

This is who you are, by the grace of God. Amen.

⁷ Dallas Willard, Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God, updated and expanded edition (InterVarsity: Downers Grove, IL, 2012), 10.