Spiritual Practices Introduction

Lesson 1

(Please read scripture references with your group)

If you were to list the qualities that describe the Christian life, would discipline make the list? Spiritual disciplines or practices are an intentional pursuit. 2 Timothy 1 :7 says, “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” Spiritual practices may be defined as behaviors that facilitate spiritual growth. As we come to know God, The Holy Spirit begins to work on our hearts to shape and mold us more into the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). God is committed to our Christlikeness, and the development of spiritual practices help in that transformation. Knowing the goal helps because “discipline without direction becomes drudgery.”

However, a word of warning is necessary. Spiritual practices are not a way of reconciliation to God. Utilizing them will not make us right with God. Obedience to Jesus in trusting his sacrifice to atone for our sins is the only way to be saved (1 Corinthians 1:30). Our righteousness originates in our being united with Christ. We don’t engage in them to be saved, but because we are saved. Beware of an innate attraction to legalism when we think of spiritual practices. The strongest effort of self-discipline will not make us holy (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. What are some disciplines/practices that Jesus particularly practiced? May include, but not limited to:

* Prayer (at least 25 times in the gospels we read of Jesus praying. Read Matthew 14:23; Luke 5:16; John 17; Garden of Gethsemane; prayers from the cross).
* Fasting (Read Luke 4:14; Matthew 4:2).
* Public Worship (Read Luke 4:16).
* Scripture Reading (Read Luke 2:41-47).
* Silence & Solitude (Read Luke 5:16).
* Service (Read Mark 10:45)

1. How realistic is it can we truly follow Jesus Christ’s life-model, or is it simply impossible in today’s hectic world?
2. Share this quote from Henri Nouwen with your group and ask what will be their most difficult challenge in learning these disciplines?

*“Discipline is the other side of discipleship. Discipleship without discipline is like waiting to run in the marathon without ever practicing. Discipline without discipleship is like always practicing for the marathon but never participating. It is important, however, to realize that discipline in the spiritual life is not the same as discipline in sports. Discipline in sports is the concentrated effort to master the body so that it can obey the mind better. Discipline in the spiritual life is the concentrated effort to create the space and time where God can become our master and where we can respond freely to God’s guidance.*

*Thus, discipline is the creation of boundaries that keep time and space open for God. Solitude requires discipline, worship requires discipline, caring for others requires discipline. They all ask us to set apart a time and a place where God’s gracious presence can be acknowledged and responded to.”*

Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith. Harper Colllins, 2006. Entry for February 27.