



PRACTICING SOLITUDE

This week we learned that solitude opens us up to the blessings of focus and freedom. When we practice solitude, we turn down the noise of life so we can focus solely on the person and reality of Jesus in our lives. And because it's just us and Jesus, these moments of solitude free us from the burden of having to impress anyone. The goal of this week's challenge is that we experience those blessings.

In his moments of solitude, Jesus would have done what Psalm 1:2 says: blessed is the one who meditates (Hebrew word "hagah") in the Word of God. To "hagah" is more than just reading a Bible verse and then praying. It's a form of relationship interaction with God, with the Scriptures as the medium. It's reading the Scriptures out loud to myself, slowly, carefully, and prayerfully, so that the Scriptures become the way that I have an interaction with Jesus.

THE CHALLENGE

Set apart a time (10-30 minutes) and a place that are both quiet and free from distraction, and practice *lectio divina* to help you meditate in the Scriptures (more info on *lectio divina* below). Do this 2-4 times this week.

WHAT TO DO IN YOUR TIME ALONE - LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio divina means "divine reading." It's an old method of Bible Study that focuses on meeting God in the Scriptures. Its goal is to allow the Scriptures (in cooperation with the Holy Spirit) to lead us, the readers, into further intimacy with God as we are shaped into the image of Jesus in the process. This practice truly embodies the heart of "hagah" in Psalm 1:2.

Any passage of Scripture can be utilized for the practice of *lectio divina*. You should start with one that is familiar to you. But here are a few suggestions:

- Psalm 23
- Psalm 100
- John 15:1-17
- Romans 12

After selecting one passage, move slowly through each of these five steps:

1. **Prepare to meet with God:** Turn your phone off and leave it another room. Situate yourself comfortably in a quiet, solitary place. Calm your body and quiet your mind before God as you work to prepare your heart to receive what God has spoken, and to respond accordingly. Finally, invite the Holy Spirit to guide your thinking and feeling as you read.
2. **Read:** Read the passage slowly and carefully. Take your time. As you move through the text, pay close attention to what words and ideas draw your attention in unique ways. When your focus is drawn to a particular word or thought, pause momentarily to reflect on them with specificity.
3. **Reflect:** Upon completing the passage, return to the beginning and read again. On your second journey through the text, allow the text to connect with you personally. Which words or phrases assume a particular resonance with your heart, your season of life, your person in this moment? Ask the following questions: What

do I need to know, or be, or do in light of the text? What does this mean for my life today?

4. **Respond:** Talk to God about your experience.
5. **Rest:** Pause to sit in God's presence before fleeing from the moment. You might express wonder, awe, gratitude, or praise through words, or you might allow yourself to feel and experience these things quietly before God.

SOME LAST WORDS

Some people have a harder time being alone than others. If that is you, you may try this and feel tempted to not do it again. It gets better with practice. So pray to the Holy Spirit to help you look to Jesus, and find motivation in His love for you. Remember, the night before he died on the cross for you, he spent it in solitude. When you do this you identify yourself with Jesus in that moment and you give of yourself for him, because he gave of himself for you first.



PRACTICING COMMUNITY

A professional pianist and someone with no musical knowledge can sit together to watch an orchestra, and they can both be utterly fascinated by the music. Yet their appreciation for it will be different, simply because one has had much more time learning the complexity of music theory and performance. In the same way, practicing community (or any other spiritual discipline, for that matter) can be a blessing, both to those who have been practicing it for a long time and to those who are new at it.

And so, while recognizing the complexity of community, which has been well researched in many books, this week's challenge to practice community will be simple and accessible to all.

THE CHALLENGE

Connect with a small group of people (3-10 people) and spend 15-45 minutes in community.

GETTING STARTED

Here are some guidelines to make the best of your time together:

1. Set a consistent time and place to meet (meeting over video chat is absolutely fine, and very responsible in this time of pandemic).
2. Discuss expectations about attendance and participation so that everyone is on the same page. You can use the following guidelines from Pete & Geri Scazzero's *Emotionally Healthy Relationships* to set the foundation for your time together:
 1. **Be Prepared:** To get the most out of your time, commit to participating in practices on your own and listening to any necessary content before meeting.
 2. **Speak for Yourself:** We encourage you to share and use "I" statements. Instead of saying, "everyone is busy," or "we all struggle with forgiving," say, "I am busy" or "I struggle with forgiving."
 3. **Respect Others:** Be brief in your sharing, remaining mindful that there are time limitations and others may want to share.
 4. **No Fixing, Saving, No Setting Other People Straight:** Respect people's journeys and trust the Holy Spirit inside of them to lead them into all truth—in his timing. Resist the temptation to offer quick advice as people share in the group.
 5. **Don't Make Assumptions:** If you find yourself feeling judgmental or defensive when someone else is sharing, ask yourself: I wonder what brought them to this belief? I wonder what they are feeling right now? I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?
 6. **Trust & Learn From Silence:** It is okay to have silence between responses as the group shares, giving members the opportunity to reflect. Remember, there is no pressure to share.
 7. **Observe Confidentiality:** In order to create an environment that is safe for open and honest participation, anything someone shares within the group should not be repeated outside of the group. However, feel free to share your own story and personal growth. Note that the exception to confidentiality is threat of or realized harm to self or harm to others, in which case you should contact a trusted professional or pastor for advice on how to proceed.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE TOGETHER

1. Start with prayer and invite the Holy Spirit to be with you in your time together.
2. After that, you're free to do whatever you want with your time together (share a meal, talk about life, read the scriptures, pray for one another, etc.). But if you need any ideas to get started, here are a couple:
 1. Spend some time answering these questions: What stood out to you in the last sermon about community? What role has community played in your life with Jesus over the years?
 2. The church in Corinth was known for its intelligence and influence, but needed to work on how to love and care for each other, leading Paul to write explicitly about this issue in a letter to them. With this in mind, read 1 Corinthians 13 aloud together and discuss the following question:
 - What gets in the way of your ability to practice the characteristics of love—such as patience and kindness—that Paul describes in this chapter of his letter? (e.g. busyness; exhaustion; strained relationships; unaddressed anger, sadness, or fear; etc.)
3. End your time together with prayer. Be sure to ask each other how you can pray for one another.
4. Set a time in the future to meet again.

SOME LAST WORDS

Just as learning to play an instrument takes time, practicing community will get better over time. Don't feel bad if your first meeting feels awkward. Give it another try, and then another, and another. Remember, you were created for this.