

“The Spiritual Practice of Meditation”
Sermon Series on *Journey through Lent* #1
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(Ps. 1:1-6)

In his classic book on Christian spirituality, *Celebration of Discipline*, author Richard Foster writes, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but deep people.”¹

Foster goes on to say that the classic spiritual practices of the Christian faith are key to discovering and developing this deeper life of which he writes, and he adds that doing spiritual practices isn’t an exercise that is just reserved for spiritual giants like Mother Teresa or Billy Graham. Instead, God intends for these practices to be something ordinary human beings do – people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, he says these spiritual disciplines are best practiced in the midst of our normal daily activities.

This morning we’re going to begin a new series of sermons during the season of Lent on the spiritual practices of the Christian faith. As we begin this series, I want to talk about why these practices are so important, and then I’ll touch on the first spiritual practice we want to highlight – the practice of meditation.

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I remember coming across a book many years ago when I was younger whose title intrigued me. The title of the book was *Why Does It Take Me So Long to Get Better?* I resonated a great deal with the question that book poses. And I remember thinking about how inconsistent I was in living my Christian faith, and how I felt like there were times when I was hot and other times I was cold in my passion for Christ. It’s an up-and-down journey, and there are times when we all struggle to stay on the path of discipleship following Jesus and not wander off the trail of pursuing God.

The book alerted me to the fact that becoming like Jesus and living for Him isn’t as easy as it sounds, and it takes a great deal of focus and intentionality to become more like Christ. Around the same time I came across that book, I was also introduced to the whole concept of discipleship as spiritual formation. In particular, I began to learn about spiritual practices, or what some people have

called the classic spiritual disciplines of the Christian faith. These are specific practices which Christians have utilized down through the centuries as a means of cultivating their life in Christ with the goal of experiencing a transformation in their spirits.

Richard Foster writes that one of the reasons these practices are so important is because of the nature of sin. He says that we're accustomed to think of sin as individual acts of disobedience to God – lying, lust, eating too much, losing our temper, and saying hurtful words. And that's true enough as far as it goes, but the Bible goes a whole lot farther than that in explaining the nature of sin. For example, in the book of Romans the apostle Paul frequently refers to sin as a *condition* that plagues the whole human race (Rm. 3:9-18), and he says that sin as a condition works its way out through our “bodily members.” In other words, sin is ingrained in the habits of the body (Rm. 7:5ff.). And there is no slavery quite like the slavery you and I experience as a result of our ingrained habits of sin.

Sometimes we try to overcome this kind of ingrained sin by launching a frontal attack. We rely on our willpower and determination, and we decide that we're never going to do the behavior again. We pray against it, we fight against it, and we set our wills against it. But it isn't long before we realize our wills just aren't strong enough, and we're more helpless to overcome the problem than we thought. Like Paul, we find ourselves unable to do the thing we know we ought to do, and the very thing we don't want to do, that's the thing we end up doing. So we cry out with Paul, “Who will set me free from this body of sin?!” (Rm. 7).

Willpower alone will never succeed in dealing with deeply ingrained habits of sin. Instead, we need a spiritual transformation from the inside out. The change we need is God's work, not ours, and He does it at the level of the soul. And we cannot make this transformation by ourselves. It's a gift of grace that is given to us by Christ. And the classic spiritual practices of the Christian faith allow us to place ourselves before the Lord so He can transform us by the power of His Spirit.

Let me give you an analogy. A farmer is helpless to grow grain in his field. All he can do is plant the seeds and provide the right conditions for grain to grow. He provides water through rain or irrigation, and he prays for the sun to shine just the right amount. Then up comes the grain by the grace of God.

That's the way it works with spiritual practices. They are a way of preparing the soil of our hearts and planting seeds of faith in our spirits so that the Holy Spirit can take them and create growth in our souls. And the outcome of all this is so that the mind and heart of Jesus becomes second nature to us, and we become like Christ.

Last fall, Clay Cooke taught a course on Christian discipleship at our church, and he shared some wonderful insights about this process of spiritual formation

and the life of Jesus becoming second nature. In his teaching he used an analogy which I found particularly helpful, and I want to repeat it for you.

Steph Curry is the two-time reigning Most Valuable Player of the National Basketball Association. What he accomplished last year is absolutely mind-blowing, and in many ways he's changing the game of basketball. No one has ever shot more accurately more often from a greater distance than Steph Curry, and he has no peers when it comes to sinking 3-point shots in the NBA.

The key to Steph's amazing ability is that he practices really, really hard hour after hour to develop his craft and train his body so that his muscle memory is automatic when dribbling or shooting a basketball. I've watched some of the drills he goes through, and it's absolutely amazing. These drills which Steph does in practice are things he does quite apart from actually playing a game, and they train his body to be able to perform the way it does when he's on the basketball court in the middle of a game. He practices these drills over and over again so that when he plays an actual game, the reaction of his body to shoot and dribble the ball the way he does becomes second nature in the heat of competition. Apart from the training, he couldn't do what he does in his natural self. It requires practice.

The same is true in the spiritual life. The spiritual practices of the Christian faith train our hearts so that living like Jesus Christ becomes second nature to us. The classic spiritual disciplines of the Christian faith have been used by followers of Christ for centuries, and they help us cultivate the character and the life of Christ. They also train our spirits in such a way that we're able to reflect the love and character of God more faithfully, even in the heat of competition, so to speak, as we're transformed by the power of His Holy Spirit.

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One of the best known and most widely used spiritual practice is the one we want to consider first – the spiritual practice of meditation. But I want to start off by saying there's a lot of confusion these days about meditation, and it's important to be clear about what the Bible says about this spiritual practice.

Whenever they hear the word "meditation," many people picture in their minds individuals sitting in lotus positions lost in a trance saying a single syllable like "Ommmm" over and over again. But that's not what Christian meditation is all about. Instead, it's a method of prayerful reflection on God's Word and His works. More about that in just a minute.

As I begin my explanation of Christian meditation, let me say first of all that part of the challenge we all have in focusing our lives on Christ is because of all the noise, the busyness, and the crowds of people we have in our lives that clamor for our attention. If we ever hope to experience a deeper spiritual life, then we must be willing to create time and space to be quiet and to enter into a world of

contemplation. Throughout the centuries, followers of Jesus Christ have used the spiritual practice of meditation as a means by which they have gained greater insight into the love and character of God and helped shape their own lives to better conform to the image of His Son.

What exactly is Christian mediation? Psalm 1 give us some insight. *“Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers”* (1:1-3). Here the psalmist tells his readers that if they want to pursue a life with God and prosper in this world, they need to spend time meditating on God’s Word. And he adds that it’s something they should do regularly – day and night, in the morning and the evening.

There are many other passages in the Bible that also talk about the value of meditation. For example, in the third chapter of the book of Hebrews, the author writes, *“Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest”* (Heb. 3:1).

The word that is translated "fix your thoughts" is the Greek word *katanoein*. It can also be translated "consider", or "reflect upon", or "study closely". The word means "to apply your mind with continuous observation", and it’s used in the gospels when Jesus urged His disciples to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Lk. 12:24ff.). They were to study them in detail and learn the spiritual truth about which Christ was speaking.

What the author is talking about here, and what the psalmist writes about in Psalm 1, is the Christian practice of meditation. Now, let me be quick to add that Christian meditation is very different from eastern mediation which is widely practiced in many parts of the world today and even here in America. Eastern mystics have emphasized that the mind is not required in their practice of meditation, that resignation is the desired outcome, and that the goal is to empty oneself of all things in order to become one with God, or in the case of Hinduism the many gods.

But the Christian practice of meditation is very different. In Christian meditation, there is an emptying of the mind of distractions in order to use it and fill it with the truths of God as revealed in His Word. It’s not pious detachment or moral indifference. To the contrary, it involves a dedicated mind in the service of Christ. In Christian meditation we don’t repeat a mantra over and over again ad nauseam. Rather, like a jeweler we hold up the diamond of God’s Word, and we turn it around to see all the facets of its truth, studying it in detail.

Here are some suggestions if you want to experiment with the spiritual practice of meditation. First, set aside some time in your day – just 10 minutes – when you can be still and undistracted. (I know, if you’ve got small children I suggest you ask God for a miracle!) Next, do what is called “centering down.” It’s a time to become still and enter into a time of silence, shut out distractions, and allow the fragmentation of your mind to become centered on God. Concentrate on your breathing and intentionally slow down.

Then try this brief exercise. It’s called “palms down, palms up.” Begin by placing your palms down as a symbolic indication that your desire is to turn over any concerns you may have to God. Inwardly pray, “Lord, I give them over to you. I give you my anger toward the person who has hurt me. I release my fear about my dentist appointment later today. I surrender my anxiety over the sales call tomorrow morning, as well as my worry about my finances.” Whatever concerns you, just say, “Palms down. I release it.”

After a couple of minutes of surrender, turn your palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord. Perhaps you can pray silently or aloud, “Lord, I would like to receive from You, Your divine love for the person who hurt me, and Your peace about the dentist appointment, and Your patience and joy and trust about my work and my finances.” Whatever you need, say to God, “Palms up. I receive it.”

Another exercise can involve Scripture. You might select a passage from the Bible to meditate on. Read it, meditate on it, pray it, and contemplate its meaning. Hold it up like a diamond in the light and study the different facets of the passage. We’re going to give you a chance to do just that in a moment toward the end of the service.

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The season of Lent gives us an opportunity to explore the deeper dimensions of our faith. We can slow down and give more attention to the nurturing of our souls. And perhaps this season will be a new beginning for you in your own walk with Christ as you explore spiritual practices. But it requires time and attention.

I close with this. One of the last things my late wife Lorie said to me before she died last November was, “Take care of the ficus tree we bought over 25 years ago and has survived four moves over the years. It means so much to me, so don’t let it die. And, Peter, you have to talk to it so that the tree knows you love it!” Lorie loved that tree so much, and it was on her mind as she was dying.

Lorie’s last words to me regarding the ficus presented a challenge. You see, I’m not very good with plants, and she knew it. I even killed a Christmas cactus when I was in college. Look at these thumbs – they’re brown, not green! So a few weeks after Lorie passed away, I called Nancy Alexander in our congregation who

is a master gardener. And I had her come over to my home and coach and instruct me on the care and watering of plants, and especially of that fichus tree. I needed to learn the helpful practices I needed to do to help the tree survive and thrive. And I'm happy to report the fichus is doing fine. But if I just let it go, and if I didn't give the tree the water and attention it needs, it would die.

And so will your soul if you neglect it. The spiritual practices are key to the watering and feeding of your soul if you want to grow in Christ. I pray you experience God's transformation during this holy season, and that you'll look back on 2017 as a year when Christ took you deeper in His heart.

Oh, and by the way, I talk to the tree all the time. It seems to really like it. Amen.

¹Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 1.