

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

DISCIPLINE EQUALS FREEDOM, WEEK 9

I. OUR CALL TO DISCIPLINE

Colossians 3:1-4

II. OUR MODEL FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

III. CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER EXPLAINED

“Contemplative prayer is a receptive posture of openness toward God. It is a way of waiting with a heart awake to God’s presence and his Word” (Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 239).

“Christian contemplation is the intuition or awareness of the presence of God; it’s being mindful of the presence of God” (Wilhoit and Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina*, 111).

“Contemplative prayer is a way of being with God that does not depend on giving the Holy One information about what we would like done in the world” (Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 240).

“If we hope to move beyond the superficialities of our culture, including our religious culture, we must be willing to go down into recreating silences, into the inner world of contemplation.... Though it may sound strange to modern ears, we should without shame enroll as apprentices in the school of contemplative prayer” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 15).

“Being with God does not depend on words. As we have already noted, when someone is known in love, words become less and less necessary in order to maintain presence to the other. Lovers learn to just be with each other. This is exactly the way we can be with God. Intimacy demands that talk be balanced by attentive openness in silence, and only as this happens do we begin to know the deeper communion of shared presence that no longer depends on words. This is contemplative prayer in its simplest and purest form. Words are unnecessary—even distracting. From time to time words may be involved, but they are not the core of the communication. That core is openness in love. This makes communication ongoing even when words are few and far between.

The goal of contemplative prayer is not the elimination of thoughts or words. The goal is openness to God, being with God. But thoughts and words cannot bring us to God or God to us. Only faith can do that. Our part is simply what John of the Cross called passive loving receptivity—leaning toward God in faith with longing, openness and love. It is by God’s grace that we enter into relationship with the divine, not by means of anything we do or don’t do. Our part is simply openness in faith. Contemplative prayer is not the suspension of action or the elimination of thoughts or words, but turning toward God in faith and openness. The rest is up to God” (Benner, *Opening to God*, 135-36).

“[It is not that] God does not exist to be experienced, but we in Western culture have a very reduced experience of God. God is present to us, but we are no longer present to God because we are not longer contemplative. Our contemplative faculty—like a limb that has been immobilized in a cast and is now healed and healthy but unable to function without rehabilitation—needs exercise and therapy. Or, like a weightlifter who has overdeveloped certain muscles to the detriment of others and has distorted his natural body, we have overfocused on one part of our consciousness and neglected another to the point where our natural consciousness is distorted.

We are living the unexamined life, and its price is a practical atheism. Fortunately, it can be overcome by contemplative awareness. God will be seen in ordinary experience when ordinary experience is fully open to him.

Contemplation has four major connotations: it implies an experiential knowledge, direct contact with someone or something, a form of obedience, of bringing one’s life into conformity with God, and an experience of reality that is not reduced, distorted, or manipulated through narcissism or pragmatism. It is seeing face to face, without the ‘glass, reflecting darkly’” (Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 62).

IV. CONTEMPLATION AND SILENCE IN THE BIBLE

Ecc 5:1-3

Lam 3:22-28

Isa 30:15

Col 1:26-27

1 Kings 19:12

Rom 8:26-27

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Contemplative prayer is not intended to replace more vocal prayer, like praying for needs and praising God. Nor is it intended to replace Scripture or meditating on it. Rather here is a “tool in the toolbelt” to complement other ways of seeking God. Below are some suggestions on how to add some contemplative prayer to an existing time with God.

1. Seek out a place of solitude and silence.
2. Spend some time reading Scripture or praying in whatever way is typical for you.
3. Consider setting a timer for how much time you want to spend in contemplative prayer so you're not distracted by deciding when to be done. 10-20 minutes would be a good start.
4. Choose some comfortable posture that will be easy for you to remain in for a while. Or perhaps choose a significant posture, like kneeling (walking may also work).
5. It is likely that closing your eyes will help you focus. Though perhaps you would rather look at nature or something that reminds of you of God, like a cross.
6. The key attitudes you want to cultivate are *intent* for God, *desire* for him, *openness* for whatever he has for you in this time, and a *listening* heart. These attitudes are more emotional than intellectual. You're not here to tell God things, ask him for things, or anything like that. You can't conjure anything up in this time or force anything to happen. Whatever happens is up to the Holy Spirit.
7. In some way, tell God of these attitudes, or at least tell God of your *desire* for these attitudes! Ask the Holy Spirit to be with you and guide you in this time.
8. Sit quietly and focus your mind on God, his presence, your love for him, his love for you. The goal is resting and relaxing in his presence. Stay still and quiet.
9. Distractions will come:
 - a. Our minds are full of thoughts. When a thought comes to you that is distracting, acknowledge it, offer it to God, then leave it aside to return your focus to God. This is excellent practice for controlling our thinking and guarding our hearts. Be open to what God would have you observe and learn about your own thinking patterns during this time.
 - b. It can be helpful to pick a short phrase of Scripture or a name of God to repeat prayerfully as needed in your mind, as a way of refocusing your attention back on God. Consider using “Lord Jesus,” or “Lord Jesus Christ.” Repeat this prayerfully in your mind every time you need to refocus on God. You are asking for his help.
 - c. If noises in your environment distract you, just think of them like city noises coming through a window beyond where a friend of yours is sitting talking with you. You can ignore the noise outside to focus on the other person you are with.
10. God may bring to mind something to pray about, some Scripture to read, or sins to confess. Do whatever you think God is leading. No time with God is wasted, and you have no agenda here.

11. You may feel absolutely nothing at all, and God may seem completely distant and absent. Do not be alarmed. This is a normal experience. We cannot conjure up a sense of God's presence. He is always present, but we are not always present to him. All we can do is *desire*, and *seek*, and *wait*. Some Christians in earlier centuries called this sense of God's distance the "cloud of unknowing." In prolonged periods they called it "the dark night of the soul," and viewed it as a word of God to move you deeper into faith. Trust God is there even if you never feel it. Try to allow your love to rise to him beyond this cloud. Submit to his will for you; he is good.
12. When your timer goes off and you are done with your time of contemplative prayer, ask God to help you carry this sense of his presence with you the rest of the day.



DISCUSSION GUIDE WEEK 9: CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Meet together this week with at least one other person to discuss your experiences. Later in the week would be ideal so you have some time to practice. Meeting in person is best, but over the phone or via video chat would work too.

Before meeting, each person should read pages 5-6 in this handout (or read it together), as well as looking over again pages 1-3. Underline key parts of the readings and write down any questions you might have.

Discussion Questions for Your Group

1. Share your experiences this week with contemplative prayer. Have you done anything like this before?
2. Discuss the reading on pages 5-6 of this handout.
3. Here are some reflection questions from the author of the handout:
 - a. Is your prayer mostly a one-sided monologue with God? Do your prayers tend to dictate to God what you would like to see happen? Are your prayers a response to God's initiative in your life? What does this tell you about your understanding of prayer?
 - b. What does it mean to remain in Christ (John 15:4)? How would you describe the "mystery" of "Christ in you" that Paul speaks of in Colossians 1:27?
 - c. Do you feel that being in the presence of God is not the same thing as prayer? Does it seem like wasting time? What does God think of you wasting time with him?
4. Read Psalm 42 together.
5. Share prayer concerns and pray for one another.

TRAINING PLAN

“This isn’t a part-time gig. This isn’t punch the clock and go home for the day. You don’t get weekends off. No. Here: there’s no such thing as a weekend. This is an everyday gig: Every day is a Monday. And you might not like that. Me? I love it. To me, every day is a beginning. A new day. A new week. A new shot at life.” –Jocko Willink, *Discipline Equals Freedom*, 64.

Circle the Level of Engagement You Are Committing to This Week

All four are good choices, and you don’t need to pick the same level every week.

First Steps:

- At least 2 days this week, practice some kind of contemplative prayer for at least 10-20 minutes. Use either my suggestions on page 2-3, the spiritual exercises on page 6, or a mix of both. I suggest you do not replace a regular time of Scripture reading or prayer with this; rather add it on to your existing practice.

Hit Harder:

- At least 3 days this week, practice some kind of contemplative prayer for at least 10-20 minutes. Use either my suggestions on page 2-3, the spiritual exercises on page 6, or a mix of both. I suggest you do not replace a regular time of Scripture reading or prayer with this; rather add it on to your existing practice.
- During this series we will process our experiences in discussion with another person or a small group of people. Sometime this week, meet up with one person discuss your experiences and encourage one another. Consider including people who are not part of our church as well. *Use Discussion Guide Week 9* (on page 3 of this handout) to guide your conversation.

Hard Core:

- At least 6 days this week, practice some kind of contemplative prayer for at least 10-20 minutes. Use either my suggestions on page 2-3, the spiritual exercises on page 6, or a mix of both. I suggest you do not replace a regular time of Scripture reading or prayer with this; rather add it on to your existing practice.
- During this series we will process our experiences in discussion with another person or a small group of people. Sometime this week, meet up with one person discuss your experiences and encourage one another. Consider including people who are not part of our church as well. *Use Discussion Guide Week 9* (on page 3 of this handout) to guide your conversation.

Beast Mode:

- At least 6 days this week, practice some kind of contemplative prayer for at least 25-45 minutes. Use either my suggestions on page 2-3, the spiritual exercises on page 6, or a mix of both. I suggest you do not replace a regular time of Scripture reading or prayer with this; rather add it on to your existing practice.
- During this series we will process our experiences in discussion with another person or a small group of people. Sometime this week, meet up with one person discuss your experiences and encourage one another. Consider including people who are not part of our church as well. *Use Discussion Guide Week 9* (on page 3 of this handout) to guide your conversation.
- If you commit to Beast Mode, please email, text, or call me so I know about it and can be praying for you. As time allows I will try to reach out to see how it is going. grhodea@grandgrace.org; 469-250-0825.

READING: CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Adapted from Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Expanded Edition, 239-42

Desire	To develop an open, restful receptivity to the Trinity that enables me to always be with God just as I am
Definition	Contemplative prayer is a receptive posture of openness toward God. It is a way of waiting with a heart awake to God's presence and his Word. This kind of prayer intentionally trusts and rests in the presence of the Holy Spirit deep in our own spirit.
Scripture	<p>“Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God.” (Romans 8:26-27, <i>The Message</i>)</p> <p>“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18)</p> <p>“This mystery has been kept in the dark for a long time, but now it’s out in the open.... Christ is in you, so therefore you can look forward to sharing in God’s glory.” (Colossians 1:26-27 <i>The Message</i>)</p>
Practice Includes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practicing the presence of God • Allowing a portion of Scripture to sink deep into the heart as a prayer to God • Practicing breath prayer, simple prayer, prayer of the heart • Resting in God and allowing the Spirit to nudge, fill or speak • Wasting time with God
God-Given Fruit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing prayer that depends on trust more than giving God information about what he should do • Living in the awareness of God’s presence within me • Move out of “doing” prayer into “being” prayer • Learning to let go of distractions in prayer • Letting God love me

Contemplative Prayer

We often associate prayer with the words we say. Contemplative prayer is a way of being with God that does not depend on giving the Holy One information about what we would like done in the world. Just as friends can enjoy one another without conversing, contemplative prayer is a way of being with God without wordiness. In contemplative prayer we rest and wait. Keeping our hearts alert and awake to the presence of God and his Word, we listen. Psalm 131 contains a wonderful image of a weaned child stilled and quieted in its mother’s arms. A weaned child isn’t looking to nurse. A weaned child comes to the mother for love and communion. The psalmist writes: “I have stilled and quieted my soul; / like a weaned child with its mother, / like a weaned child is my soul within me.”

In contemplative prayer we rest in God, depending on him to initiate communion and communication. We don't ask for things, we simply open ourselves to the Trinity, trusting we will be received into restful arms. It can be helpful to use the imagination to put yourself in a receptive frame of mind. Use a Scriptural image. Imagine you are a weaned child sitting in your mother's lap. Lean your head against her and rest. Or imagine that the good Shepherd has led you beside the still waters (Psalm 23). Lie down and rest there with God.

Contemplative prayer requires patience, but it is not the heavy work that intercession can sometimes be. It can even be light, playful, tender, and joyful. In a world given to activity and work, contemplative prayer is a way we join God in a place of divine rest and love.

Contemplative prayer is a response to God's invitation to "abide in Christ." In Colossians 1:26-27, Paul writes of (1) the saving gospel to those without Christ, and (2) the "mystery of the gospel" to the saints, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Contemplative prayer puts us in a place to become more receptive to the mystery of the gospel, "Christ in you." Contemplative prayer is a container discipline that includes a number of ways of being with Jesus in prayer: centering prayer, prayer of recollection, breath prayer and labyrinth prayer. Contemplative prayer need not be a mystical experience; it is far more likely to be a restful experience of Christ in me.

Life makes it evident that what we contemplate shapes us. Saints down through the ages have trusted that contemplating the truth, beauty and goodness of the Trinity could ultimately shape and change their souls. The interior transformation that the saints call "divine union" is a fruit of this contemplation.

Spiritual Exercises

1. Settle into a time of quietness with God (if it is hard for you to sit still in God's presence, go for a walk). Say to God, "Here I am. I am with you." Be with God. Welcome him with open arms. Be in the moment without controlling or influencing it. Give God the gift of your love and presence. Do not strive. There is nothing to achieve. Be with God in loving attentiveness. Leave his presence gently when you sense you must go.
2. One way to quiet our minds is to quiet our bodies. Spend five minutes intentionally relaxing your body and breathing deeply. Afterward, spend five minutes noticing where your mind wants to go. Offer your noticing to God. Then let go and open yourself to God's love. Be receptive to a prayer God may be giving you to say. (Remember, contemplative prayer is more receptive than active.) End your prayer by breathing in God's love. Go with the awareness that your every breath is God's gift.
3. Light a candle and become quiet before the creator of light. Allow the candlelight to center your heart in the Light of the world. Offer yourself and all your darkness to Jesus. Remain in his light. Be comforted; all the darkness in the world cannot put out the light of one match. How much greater is the Light in you.
4. *Sacred word.* Choose a prayer word as the symbol of your desire to let Jesus' action and presence form you. The word could reflect a deep desire of your heart (e.g., love, grace, peace), or the word might be a name or title of God (e.g., Jesus, great Shepherd, Counselor, Healer of my soul, Defender). Become still and offer yourself and your love to God. Let this word or phrase draw you into the presence of Christ. When you are distracted, return gently to your word and to the Lord. At the end of the prayer, remain still for several minutes. Throughout your day return to your word and remind the Lord of your love for him.