

# SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

## READING THE BIBLE

### First Word, Last Word

Choose a book in the Bible to read through. If you are new to the Bible, try either Mark or Philippians. Open a Bible to that book and place it right next to where you sleep. When you get up in the morning, before you do anything else, pick up the Bible and read until you find something that either challenges or comforts you. You might read for 10 minutes or you might read one verse, but once you find something that comforts or challenges you, it is time to stop. Place the open Bible back down and go about the rest of your day taking time to occasionally reflect on what you read. When you go to bed, pick up the Bible and start reading where you left off until you get to something new that challenges or comforts you. Do this every morning and every evening so that the first and last words you hear in a day are God's.

### Lectio Divina

Read a Bible passage slowly two times and notice what word or phrase you are drawn to. Take a few silent minutes to contemplate the meaning of that word or phrase. Then, spend a few minutes praying in response to the passage you read and the word or phrase you focused on. Say to God what you'd like to say to Him in response to what you read and have been thinking about. Spend a few minutes in stillness with God and allow him to speak to you (perhaps in an image or metaphor). Feel free to go back and reread the text, looking for another word or phrase.

### Gospel Contemplation

In the 1500s, Ignatius founded the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits. He developed his exercises, originally done as a 30-day retreat, to help people deepen their relationship with God. Gospel Contemplation is a way of imagining ourselves in a gospel story.

1. Choose a story from the life of Jesus where He interacts with other people.
2. Open in prayer and ask God to speak to you through the story.
3. Read the story through at least a couple of times until it becomes familiar.
4. Use your imagination to visualize the scene of the story. Try to engage all of your senses. What does it look like? What do you smell? What do you hear? What do you feel? If it helps, close your eyes so that you can immerse yourself as much as possible into the story.
5. Place yourself further into the story by identifying with one specific character or observer as if you are standing to the side. From your chosen perspective, focus on Jesus and what He is doing and saying. How is he interacting with you or others? What are you feeling? Be sure to avoid any self-critical thoughts.

6. Close with prayer by having a conversation with Jesus, as a friend speaking to another friend, and focus on whatever you experienced during this exercise.

## PRAYER

### Breath Prayer

Get comfortable in a place as free from distractions as possible. Close your eyes and slow your breathing. Focus on the air coming in through your nose and your exhaling going down into your chest. Breathe in the breath of God, and breathe out any distractions. As you breathe, recite these words; *Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*. Some of the words can be placed on the inhale and the rest on the exhale. The goal of breath prayer is to center the mind and body on Jesus. Often times the prayer will be repeated a specific number of times using a prayer rope to keep track, but you can either set a timer for a set amount of time or engage in the prayer as long as you like. It can be helpful to come back to this prayer several times throughout a day.

### Prayer of Examen

The Examen is about looking at our lives in a way that reveals Christ's presence in everyday moments.

1. Review your last 24 hours, not on an hour-by-hour basis, but by paying attention to your emotions. What were you feeling?
2. Make note of the times you felt God's presence and give Him thanks for that.
3. Be aware of the times you felt His absence or resisted His presence, and reflect on those.
4. Close this time by choosing one feature of the day to pray from, and use that as a way to pray for the entire day.

### Thankfulness Prayer

Our consumer culture draws our attention to all of the things that we do not have. Thankfulness draws our attention to all of the things that we *do* have. Thankfulness also highlights where God is working in our world so that we can join Him there. As we take time to notice what God is doing, we become more receptive to his love, priorities, and guidance. Write down people and things you are thankful for. What do you have that you do not deserve? What do you want to say to God for these things? Think of a current hardship in your life and tell God how you feel about it. Where is their evidence of God in this hardship? If you cannot see God in your hardship, spend some time reflecting on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). What does He want to tell you? Thank God for at least one thing from yesterday and tell Him what it meant to you.

## REST

### Unplugging

Set aside a predetermined time period to be completely digital free. It is not enough to just make a commitment to not answer your phone, instead you must turn your phone off and put it away. This idea scares us because we are afraid of what we might miss, but the reality is that we miss much more when we focus too much on our digital devices. You can spend this time alone or with others, just make sure that you do something that is meaningful for you. It can be helpful to plan ahead what you are going to do so that you can get the most out of it. Some ideas are to read a book, go on a hike, have a game night, write a letter to a friend, or have a picnic.

### Sabbath

In the Old Testament, God commanded the people of Israel to observe a day of rest known as the Sabbath. Sabbath was not just a day to take off work, but a day to rest in God and experience renewal. Practicing a regular Sabbath is a way to live our lives in a rhythm that acknowledges our limits and helps us to depend on God. Look at your calendar and choose a day, or at least half a day, that you can set aside for a Sabbath. This should be a time that is not just free from professional work, but also from household chores and other responsibilities. Plan to do things that are life-giving for you, and if you are doing it as a family then plan things that are life-giving for your family. Some of these can be recreational like riding bikes or going to a park, but you should also set aside some time to be with God. You can read scripture, spend time in prayer, or even journal and share your thoughts. After practicing Sabbath a few times, try to find a way to incorporate it into your regular rhythm of life. It could be a weekly or monthly practice, or you could identify half days and sprinkle them throughout a given time period. The point is not to be legalistic, but to take a step back and let God run the world while you rest and refresh.

## GENEROSITY

### Percentage Giving

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they should decide in their hearts what they want to give, and should not give out of duty or obligation (2 Corinthians 9:7). Percentage giving is choosing ahead of time to set aside the first certain percentage of your income to give back to God. Generosity is a journey and it grows over time. It can be helpful to pick a starting point of where you can begin now, but also a goal of where you would like to get to. This can help you strategize for how your generosity can grow in the future. By practicing percentage giving, we choose to make God a priority in our lives and we also learn to depend on Him.