
SESSION TWO



Practicing the Prayer-Filled Life

THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

After a few minutes of silent prayer, open with a time of sharing that the leader begins by reading this opening paragraph, sharing his or her "letter to God," and answering the question posed.

When everyone has had a chance to respond, ask a member to read this Scripture passage.

Reflection Question

After a brief discussion, choose someone to read this section.

THE FOOTPRINTS OF GOD

At our last meeting each of us agreed to write a short "letter to God." I will read my letter aloud first and answer the question, *What did I learn about God and about myself from doing this exercise?* After I have finished, please take turns reading your letter to us and answering the same question.

JESUS AND THE PRAYER-FILLED LIFE

Gospel Passage: Mark 14:32-36

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and [Jesus] said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

What impresses you the most about this passage?

THINKING IT THROUGH

Jesus was a very busy person, yet in this passage, as in many others, we see that he took time to talk with God (Mark 1:35, 6:46; Matt. 14:22-23a; Luke 6:12). One might easily conclude from reading the Gospels that the central

focus of Jesus' life was his relationship with the Father. He said that he could do nothing apart from God and that his entire mission in life was to do the will of God (John 5:19). We see this focus in Jesus' daily life. He frequently left the crowds to be alone with God, retreating to "a deserted place" to pray (Mark 1:35). He became a role model for the disciples; when they looked at Jesus, they longed to be like him, to have the same kind of intimacy with God that he had. That is why they said, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). The disciples knew that Jesus knew how to pray.

What set Jesus apart from the disciples was the intimate relationship he had with the Father. Notice how he addressed God: "Abba, Father." The word "Abba" is similar to our word "Daddy." It indicates closeness, love, a trusting relationship like that of little children to their parents. Jesus was not afraid to talk with God, to share his fears and his anguish. In the Garden of Gethsemane—at his moment of greatest need—Jesus prayed. His prayer was faith-full: "For you all things are possible." His prayer was honest: "Remove this cup from me." And in the end his prayer expressed a desire to do the will of God: "Yet, not what I want, but what you want."

Jesus was a person of prayer. He prayed regularly; he prayed often. The busier he got, the more he talked with God. Why? Because he *knew* God! He knew God as "Abba," his loving Father, whose main interest was to love, to teach, and to heal his people. For Jesus, God was not only a God of compassion but also a God of strength. Jesus turned to God to find the strength he needed to complete his task. By his actions, Jesus became a model, a "divine paradigm" that we can imitate.

Jesus asked God to "remove the cup" from him—the cup symbolizing his destiny to die on the Cross. Why do you think he prayed this way?

Reflection Question

GOD AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

At the heart of each Tradition of the Church is God. Jesus is "God with us," a physical presence to show us what God is like. His actions and words reveal God's nature to us. When we practice "the prayer-filled life"—that is, the Contemplative Tradition—we discover the tender love of God. Jesus prays to the Father because he knows God's nature—loving, giving, forgiving. Jesus tells us that God knows our needs even before we ask him (Matt. 6:8). Jesus describes (and demonstrates in his own life) a God of compassion and long-suffering love who desires to bless us with wisdom and courage and inner healing.

The most vivid picture of God's tender love comes in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). A wayward son who has squandered his father's money—his own inheritance—returns in repentance and remorse, expecting judgment and punishment. Instead he receives a loving welcome and a warm embrace. This is God's nature, what he is like. If we knew God in this way—as a loving, forgiving Father—praying and talking with him

Have one member of the group read this entire section.

would not be a chore or a duty but would rather be our inner desire throughout the day. God longs for us, searches for us—and even died for us—in hopes that we will respond to his longing, searching, self-sacrificing love. Once we catch a glimpse of what God is like, we will want to spend time with him.

Reflection Question

Allow each person a few moments to respond to this question.

As before, have a member read this entire section.

The father in the story of the Prodigal Son gives us a snapshot of the nature of God. How does this picture match your own understanding of what God is like?

WHAT IS THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION?

From Jesus we see, hear, and learn about God's nature. Because he knew what God is like, Jesus—as we have seen—frequently spent time with him in solitude and in prayer. These two factors—the nature of God and the practice of Jesus—gave birth to the Contemplative Tradition.

The Contemplative Tradition is a response to God's longing that we spend time with him, that we create space in our lives to be with him. Our lives are busy and full of worries and anxiety, and our usual response is to push God out of the way entirely. Practicing the disciplines of the Contemplative Tradition equips us to create in our lives the "space" that God longs for and the intimacy that we need.

Most of us live in the midst of jobs and families and responsibilities that hamper our efforts to spend time with God. And everything in our hurry-scurry culture works against our efforts to set aside time for him. Colleges and businesses provide courses in time management so that we can squeeze every drop from every minute. Televisions bombard us with ads that tempt us to spend our "leisure time" shopping or attending movies or eating out. Radios incessantly broadcast talk shows, music, sports events, and news analyses with such force that the sound vibrates our inner organs. Sometimes even our backgrounds prompt us to feel guilty when we are not doing something "creative."

We all agree that it is *very* difficult to make space for God in our day and in our culture, and yet we need times of solitude and silence, times of contemplation and reflection, times of prayer and meditation. We need these times—just as much as Jesus needed them—to gain strength and wisdom and compassion. All three qualities flow from the space we make for God in our lives.

Reflection Question

Give each member a chance to respond to this question if he or she wishes.

Think of a moment in your life when you felt very close to God. Can you describe the setting (what you were doing and your surroundings) as well as the experience?

PRACTICING THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

We have looked at the practice of Jesus, the nature of God, and the main goal of the Contemplative Tradition. Now we turn our attention to the actual practice of that Tradition. The following list includes activities by which we can begin to enter the "prayer-filled life," a life of intimacy with God. These "spiritual disciplines" or "spiritual exercises" help open us to God's presence. Each exercise is followed by a brief explanation of how to do it. Choose *one* of the following exercises and practice it several times before the next meeting. Why? Because experience is the best teacher. You are trying to become "full of prayer," and to become prayer-full, you have to pray. Keep in mind that these are only a sampling of many exercises that can help you enter into the contemplative life.

Three simple precautions: First, do not be afraid to fail. To reach a goal is not the reason you do a spiritual discipline; it is to experience God. Even in failure you are learning and experiencing new and valuable things. Second, keep your emphasis on God, not on the method. It is hard initially, but try to think about *why* you are doing an exercise rather than *what* you are doing. Third, feel free to modify any exercise to fit your needs. In the first session we looked at our areas of strength and weakness. You may be strong in this area—the prayer-filled life—or you may be weak. Adapt the exercise you choose to challenge your strengths and support your weaknesses.

EXERCISES IN THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

1. *Set aside five to ten minutes each day for prayer.*
Find a time in your schedule that is free of interruption, when you can turn your thoughts to God. You may want to read a Bible verse and meditate on it, or you may want to spend the time talking with God about your needs and concerns. The idea is simply to set aside your busy activities (or not start them) and turn your attention to God.
2. *Spend five to ten minutes each day in silence.*
Carve out a time that is free from interruption and use this time to be silent. While letting silence and its peace wash over you, pray without words. Very close friends can communicate without words; try this with God. Simply enjoy God's presence, God's loving arms wrapped around you.
3. *Read selections from a devotional book.*
Find a book on the spiritual life that interests you. It may be a spiritual classic such as St. Augustine's *Confessions*, or it may be a devotional classic such as Oswald Chambers's *My Utmost for His Highest*. Devotional periodicals such as *Guideposts* or *The Upper Room* (or some other denominational publication) may interest you. However, instead of reading what you select simply to understand it, read it "with God," knowing that God is there in the room with you. Discover God in the reading.

Again, choose a member to read these paragraphs.

Have each member read over the exercises silently, or have members read them aloud, one at a time. Spend a few moments considering them as each person chooses the exercise he or she will do before the next meeting.

4. *Pray the same prayer for ten minutes each day.*

There is a tradition in the Eastern Church called "hesychasm," which is the practice of repeating a simple prayer over and over. The idea is to focus our thoughts on God so that God can enter our heart. You might like to try the "hesychastic" prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me," or use a verse from a psalm—perhaps "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Ps. 51:10).

5. *Write an original prayer.*

Take time to write a prayer as if it were a "letter to God." Beginning with "Dear God," tell God your hopes and dreams, your worries, your needs. You may even want to confess your sins and ask for forgiveness. Most important, use the prayer to open the lines of communication between yourself and God. Do not write the prayer as though it would be read by others someday. Like a personal journal, keep your prayer confidential so that you have the freedom to be honest. Once you are done, read and pray it every day until our next gathering.

ENDING AND BEGINNING

Allow each member time to share which of the above exercises he or she plans to do during the week. Encourage each other in this venture. After everyone has shared, join hands in a circle and pray the Lord's Prayer aloud and in unison.

Ask for a volunteer to lead the next meeting.

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

And forgive us our trespasses

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever

Amen.

