



# Ideas and Exercises

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We all struggle to live the Traditions day by day. Discovering new activities that are rooted in the spiritual disciplines and the Traditions is a key part of our spiritual growth. Every week we need to incorporate one exercise into our weekly plans. The following exercises, divided into the six areas of discipleship that we have been studying, are only representative of the many different activities that help us go forward in the spiritual life. Since these ideas are simply *suggestions* and contain no rules or standards, feel free to modify them to fit your needs and situation. Full publication information for all books mentioned in these exercises can be found in the Bibliography on page 105.

Before presenting these suggestions, though, we have five cautions.

CAUTION I: Avoid vague goals.

SOLUTION: Make your goals *measurable* (for example, "Read one chapter from the Bible each day").

CAUTION II: Don't try to do the impossible or unprofitable.

SOLUTION: Be sure that your plan is *attainable*. Ask your group, "Is this too much for me to try?"

CAUTION III: Don't distance yourself from the exercises.

SOLUTION: *Personalize* the activities by doing them frequently and trying new ones often.

CAUTION IV: Refrain from procrastination.

SOLUTION: Make *specific* plans now (for example, "Meet God in prayer every morning at 7:30").

CAUTION V: In spite of Cautions I and IV, avoid becoming rigid or legalistic.

SOLUTION: Be *flexible* when planning by focusing on the interior practice, not the exterior activity.

And above all, remember that "when we fail to plan, we plan to fail."

## PRACTICING THE PRAYER-FILLED LIFE: THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION



1. Pray for ten minutes each morning or evening.
2. Pray without words (in silence) for five minutes each day.
3. Offer a short prayer throughout the day (for example, the hesychastic prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner" or the verse "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" [Ps. 51:10]).
4. Set aside an hour that will be free of distraction. Use the time for solitude, prayer, and meditation on the Bible.
5. Read a section from a devotional classic such as Augustine's *Confessions*, Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God*, or Madame Guyon's *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ*. (See *Devotional Classics*, a volume in the RENOVARÉ Resources for Spiritual Renewal, for other suggestions.)
6. Write out a prayer in your journal. You may wish to keep it private, or you may wish to share it with your group. Write the letter as if it were addressed to God, telling him how you feel.
7. Learn to appreciate God through his creation. Take a walk in a park or simply sit and watch a sunset. Consider the majesty of the world, giving thanks and praise for all of God's creation.
8. Set aside fifteen minutes for a time of thanksgiving. Thank God for everything you can think of. Do not worry about intercession or confession; this is a time simply to give thanks.
9. Practice the art of listening to God. Meditate on a verse of Scripture, being attentive to what God wants to tell you. Note the words in the verse. Does anything stand out? Turn the verse into a prayer. Ask God to teach you during this time of silence.
10. Hold people and situations before God in prayer. Take ten minutes a day to bring your friends and loved ones before God. Do not worry about words; simply imagine Jesus standing beside them before the throne of grace. Let God minister to all of their cares and hurts.
11. Pray for the leaders in your church. Find a time this week to pray specifically for your pastors and other leaders. Ask God to give them strength and wisdom and compassion. Pray for their protection.
12. Try "flash prayers." When you see someone—anyone—silently pray for that person. Riding on a bus, standing in a line, sitting in a room—wherever you are, inwardly ask the Lord to give those around you joy, to touch their lives with his presence.
13. See if you can wake up praying. Give your day to God in that prayer, asking him to guide you through each meeting, each conversation, each appointment.

14. Take a "prayer walk" this week. Choose crowded urban streets where you can bless many passersby with prayer, or go to a park or woods where you can rediscover that the earth and everything in it is the Lord's.
15. Pray as you jog, swim, or play tennis. Bless the homes you pass as you run or head for the pool or court. Thank God for your swimming friends. Even try praying for your tennis opponent!

**Other Ideas**

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## PRACTICING THE VIRTUOUS LIFE: THE HOLINESS TRADITION



1. Work on taming your tongue; speak only when necessary.
2. Try a twenty-four-hour fast to discipline your appetite. Eat no food from one lunch to another, skipping both dinner and breakfast. Modify the fast by drinking fruit juice and plenty of water. Use the time you save by not eating to read your Bible.
3. Resolve to overcome temptation with silence and prayer. Instead of fighting or running from temptation, stand in silence, praying for God to give you strength.
4. Fast from the television for a week. Many people find television programs addictive, and they are certainly time-consuming. By not watching television for a week, you will be able to discern its effect upon your life. Again, use the time you gain to try some other spiritual discipline or simply to enjoy your family, perhaps playing a game or taking a walk together.
5. Be a "gossip-buster." Whenever you or someone you are with begins to gossip, quickly end it. Guide the conversation to a different subject.
6. Practice the art of speaking positively. Resolve to make two positive remarks about someone or something for every negative remark you make. Be careful not to get too far in debt!
7. Spend ten minutes each morning thinking about good things. Discipline your thoughts until they readily focus on the true, the honorable, the just, the pure, the pleasing, the commendable (Phil. 4:8).
8. Memorize the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:2-17). These laws were sweeter than honey to the Psalmist (Ps. 19:10). Memorize them as a way to make them a more conscious part of your daily life.
9. Write out a confession in your journal. One of the best ways to get back on track after wrongdoing is to confess the things you have done or left undone. Be honest. God knows your faults and failings—you will not be telling him anything he does not already know! The exercise is for your benefit, not God's.
10. Cultivate integrity in your speech by focusing on simplicity and honesty in all that you say. Watch for guile and deception, which can creep into your speech in subtle ways. Be ruthless as you seek to tell the truth in everything.
11. Do a "covet" check in your life. Are you enviously desiring anything? The Tenth Commandment tells us not to covet our neighbor's possessions. Unchecked, covetousness leads to constant turmoil. Make a "wish list" of all the things you would like to have, and then destroy the list while asking God to help you let go of your desire to possess. Finally, offer a prayer of thanksgiving for all that you have.

12. Do a "treasure" check in your life. Are there things that you prize too much? Jesus warned us not to place our hope in things that will decay and perish. The rich young ruler of Luke 18:18-30 kept all the commandments but lacked one thing: the ability to let go of his wealth. If you cannot freely give a treasure away, maybe it possesses you more than you possess it. Give it away and experience the freedom that comes when you relinquish a treasure.
13. Keep the Sabbath. "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" is one of the most neglected of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:8). The Sabbath is actually God's gift to a frazzled world. Sit down with your family and discuss how you can set one day (usually Sunday) aside for rest and recreation. Refuse to do any work—even the catch-up housework that presses you. Resist the guilt and simply rest in God. Allow yourself permission to do nothing, absolutely nothing.
14. Set aside an hour for "holy leisure." Find an hour when you can nap on a couch, or lie in a hammock, or relax over a coffee. God, who made us and realizes that we need rest, will bless our "holy leisure."
15. Read *The Pursuit of Holiness*, a bestseller by Jerry Bridges that reveals the undiluted truth about sin, temptation, and the unparalleled freedoms that come from saying no.

### Other Ideas

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## PRACTICING THE SPIRIT-EMPOWERED LIFE: THE CHARISMATIC TRADITION



1. Search the Scriptures to discover your spiritual gifts. Romans 12:6–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8–11 list gifts that we are to strive for and exercise as members of the body of Christ. Read the passages, pray about them, and seek understanding. You may want to read a book on the subject. Donald Gee's *Concerning Spiritual Gifts* is a good introduction.
2. Explore the "Spirit-empowered" roles. Ephesians 4:11–13 lists several leadership positions in the Church. Read the passage, asking the Spirit to direct your thinking to how you can best serve the body of Christ.
3. Pray for the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that we must "ask" for the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). Do you feel that the Spirit is present and active in your life? If not, spend an hour this week in prayer, asking the Lord for the Holy Spirit's real and life-giving presence.
4. Spend time reading about the "fruit" of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22–23 lists the fruit, or "virtues," of the Spirit. The presence of that fruit is a sure sign that God's Spirit is working in your life. Choose one fruit that you would like to see increase in your life, pray for its increase, and seek ways you can nurture its growth.
5. Bless others with your "fruit." What fruit of the Spirit is most evident in your life (Gal. 5:22–23)? This week consciously be a conduit for the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that the Spirit has given you.
6. Allow the Holy Spirit to become part of your prayer life. When you are praying this week, ask the Spirit to intercede when you cannot find words to express your concerns and your joys.
7. Welcome the illuminating work of the Spirit. One of the Spirit's functions is to make the words of the Bible come to life. When reading the Scriptures this week, open your mind to the "divine Interpreter."
8. Put on your armor. As Christians, we are given divine equipment called the "armor of God" (Eph. 6:10–17). List the different pieces of armor and ask the Spirit which one you need most at this time. When the answer comes, ask the Spirit to add this piece to your array of virtues so that you can withstand the devil's attacks.
9. Exercise your spiritual gifts. If you have discovered your spiritual gifts (see exercise 1), spend an hour this week exercising them in your local church.
10. Seek others' counsel about how you can best use your spiritual gifts. The Spirit sometimes gives guidance through other people. Ask a few friends whom you trust and who know you well what they see as your spiritual gifts and how they see those gifts best used. From this exercise you may reach a new awareness (or confirm an old one) concerning your service in the body of Christ.

11. Really *worship* when you go to church this week. Walk in the door with "a spirit of thanksgiving." Sit in silence prior to the service. Meditate on God's mercy and majesty. Sing the hymns with enthusiasm. Fill the sanctuary with prayer. Above all, praise God. You may find that this practice infects the people sitting around you with joy and thanksgiving.
12. Study the Scripture passages about the Holy Spirit. Use a concordance or a chain-reference Bible to find verses that refer to the Holy Spirit—his nature, role, and deeds. Highlight those references that you find new and exciting.
13. Pray for the Spirit to give you confidence in the promises of God in Christ. Begin by reading Romans 8. The Holy Spirit is able to verify your position as a child of God the Father. Let the Spirit teach you how to pray to God as his child, saying "Abba, Father," and give you a life of confidence before God.
14. Read Tony Campolo's book *How to Be Pentecostal Without Speaking in Tongues*. It is an excellent introduction to the charismatic life, focusing on the "vital aliveness" found in charismatic communities while avoiding the excesses found in every Tradition.
15. For fifteen minutes a day this week, wait on the Holy Spirit. Allow the Spirit to come into every corner of your life—your secrets, your desires, your failings, your victories, your all.

**Other Ideas**

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## PRACTICING THE COMPASSIONATE LIFE: THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION



1. Write a supportive letter this week to someone you feel may be needing a word of encouragement.
2. If you live with others, help out around the house. This may seem minor, but household chores are usually done grudgingly. Your willingness to do more than your share of work will be a real service to the others in the household.
3. Spend an afternoon working at a local shelter or soup kitchen. Your help is sorely needed, even if you can only sweep floors.
4. Donate blood. We are giving the gift of life when we give blood. Call your local blood bank and set up an appointment.
5. Recycle your trash. Caring for the environment is an issue of social justice. Recycling what you throw away increases the next generation's chance for a bright future.
6. Help a friend in need. Do you know someone who needs assistance? If so, help that person, whether the task is hanging wallpaper, grocery shopping, helping with a move, or fixing the roof. Volunteering to help is a simple way to care for your neighbor.
7. Write to your member of Congress—senator or representative—and share your views. Is there an issue that you feel strongly about? Be sure that you have the facts straight and are expressing genuine Christian concern, not just prejudice.
8. Join a prison ministry. Your local church should know about groups that regularly minister to prisoners (and their families) in your area. Contact such a group and go with them to visit the inmates, who often feel forgotten in their isolation. Jesus told us that when we visit inmates, we are visiting him (Matt. 25:31–46).
9. Address an injustice with compassion. Is someone being treated unfairly? Do not be silent when your words could make a difference.
10. Practice the service of hiddenness. Do a kind deed (for example, shoveling snow from a sidewalk or calling on nursing home residents) without being asked or expecting recognition.
11. Serve others with your words. Protect people's reputation and speak well of others as a way of serving them. Kind words are great deeds.
12. Serve others by letting them have "space." We sometimes overwhelm people or consume their time or usurp their freedom with our expectations. Make a concerted effort to give people space. Ask them what they want to do or if they want to be alone or if they are free to talk before imposing your expectations upon them.



13. Serve others by letting others serve you. Are you guilty of not letting other people do things for you? Hold a door? Buy a cup of coffee? Make a photocopy? This is a sin. It is a gift to others to let them serve you; do not deny them this joy.
14. Read a book that discusses social justice issues. As an example, *The Politics of Jesus* by John Howard Yoder forces readers to ask hard questions. You may also want to read Donald Kraybill's book *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. Though you may not agree with everything these authors say, they should stimulate your thinking.
15. Write a one-page response this week to the following question: What is the most pressing social justice issue today, and what position should I, as a Christian, take? Share the paper with the other members of your Spiritual Formation Group.

**Other Ideas**

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## PRACTICING THE WORD-CENTERED LIFE: THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION



1. Read the Bible for fifteen minutes a day. Choose a method of reading (for example, tackling a chapter or a section a day) and follow it. Let the Bible influence the course of each day.
2. Meditate on John 1:1. Write the verse on several three-by-five cards and put them on your bathroom mirror, on the dashboard of your car, and in places where you spend a lot of time. As often as possible, pause, read the verse, and meditate on the mystery of Jesus Christ as the living Word of God.
3. Ponder John the Baptist's role. Read John 1:6-9 several times, paying particular attention to what John was to Jesus (a "witness") and what his task was (to "testify" about Jesus). Consider how John's example can help you be more assertive in your proclamation of the gospel.
4. Read a chapter of the Bible before falling asleep. Reading from the Bible just before we retire for the night is a nice way to end the day. It also helps us awaken with the word of God on our minds. You may want to read the chapter aloud with your children or your spouse or your college roommate.
5. As you carry out your regular activities this week, think about the following question: How has my newfound understanding of Jesus as the living Word of God affected the practice of my faith? Record your response in your journal.
6. Talk about your faith in Jesus Christ with a relative or close friend. Often we neglect to talk about our faith with the most important people in our lives!
7. Meditate on a psalm once a day. The psalms are wonderful prayers that help us commune with God. Let the words of the psalms be your words. Read them slowly, over and over, until they become your prayers.
8. Meditate on the mystery of God entering history. Read John 1:14, remembering that "Word" in this verse refers to Jesus Christ. The apostle John writes that "the Word became flesh." Hold this mystery before God and ask him to help it take root in the deepest recesses of your soul.
9. Make a real effort to reach others with the message of Christ. When you are talking with someone, guide the conversation into issues that affect you deeply, such as life, death, meaning, and so on. Ask the person how he or she feels. If you discern little interest, politely drop the subject. But if you sense a yearning to hear more, freely share what Christ means to you.

10. Memorize a verse or passage of Scripture. Some people like to memorize "theme" verses (for example, verses that relate to God's power). Choose a verse (or even two or three) and recite it to your Spiritual Formation Group during the next meeting.
11. Describe the "living Word" in your own words. First read the description of Jesus' eternal and physical life that is recorded in 1 John 1:1-3 several times. Then put the same thoughts into your own words, writing them in your journal.
12. Get acquainted with one of your neighbors. Simple friendliness can often afford opportunities to share God's goodness.
13. Study the Bible. Use a Bible that has study notes or get a good commentary and delve deeply into a passage, a chapter, or an entire book.
14. Read Revelation 1:12-20. When John saw the living Christ, he fell at his feet as though dead. How do you respond to Christ's presence? With fear? dread? confusion? awe? gratitude? Thank God for sending Jesus Christ to be our ever-living Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend. If you experience fear or dread or confusion about Christ's role, ask God to replace those feelings with love.
15. Rediscover the gospel of Jesus Christ. Read Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:14-36 and answer these questions, writing them on a piece of paper: Who was Jesus? What did he do? What is the proof? What were the results? Now write down how your answers should affect your life.

### Other Ideas

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## PRACTICING THE SACRAMENTAL LIFE: THE INCARNATIONAL TRADITION



1. Choose a day this week to do everything in honor of God. Drive your car, answer the telephone, conduct the staff meeting, greet people, and enter data in the computer to an audience of One.
2. Receive the sacrament of Communion or Eucharist. Attend a church that will be serving Communion. Receive Eucharist joyfully, knowing that Jesus Christ is truly present to you and longs to strengthen and teach you daily.
3. Read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn integrates his faith into the warp and woof of *One Day*, following in the tradition of novelists Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy.
4. Remove the barrier that keeps God outside. Imagine that you are wearing full-body armor that keeps God's spirit out of the innermost parts of your being. Remove it, invite God in, and wait until you feel that the work is complete, giving thanks at the end.
5. Help your church organize an art show. Artists—painters, potters, photographers, sculptors, weavers, and others—creatively express the *imago Dei*, the image of God, through their art. Some of the greatest artists ever were Christian. Organize an art show of the work done by members of your fellowship.
6. Read *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. Woolman was an eighteenth-century tailor, businessman, and minister of Christ whose tender conscience and persuasive manner awakened the hard hearts of colonial Americans to the evils of slavery. Woolman's life is a stellar example of how the Incarnational Tradition works.
7. Attend a service at a synagogue on the Sabbath. It is difficult to understand many of the stories in the Gospels unless we become familiar with the Jewish faith. Pay special attention to the liturgical aspects of the service.
8. Attend a Christian church outside your tradition. If you belong to a liturgical church (for example, Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran), attend a "free church" on Sunday—and vice versa. Participate fully, feeling and absorbing the presence of God in the songs, prayers, sermon or homily, and sacraments.
9. Bring the presence of God to the ill. Contact a nursing home and make arrangements to visit the patients. Most homes have a lounge where mobile, cognizant patients read and watch television; perhaps you can talk with them there. As you converse with a patient, place your hand on his or her arm or hand, open yourself to God, and ask God to fill the patient with his presence.

10. Listen to Handel's *Messiah*. This glorious oratorio has endured for over two hundred years and broken down the sacred/secular walls in the world of music. Listen to a recording of the complete work, paying particular attention to the words that flowed out of George Frideric Handel's faith.
11. Bring God into your workplace by asking him to help you solve problems. This communication does not need to be formal; quick, silent prayers spoken before or during a telephone conversation or meeting are heard by God too.
12. Bless your home. If you have not already done so, walk through your house and bless each room. Most of us spend the majority of our lives in our homes and fail to invite God into them.
13. Visit with children. If children live in your neighborhood, make a special effort to engage them in conversation. Young children are so transparent that they help us see God.
14. Take God with you wherever you go. During the next few days make a special effort to be a "tabernacle" where God dwells. Cooperate with God to bring good wherever you walk—in the park, in your home, in your church—by praying for those you meet.
15. Invite God to your mealtimes. For one week, make a special effort to sense the presence of the risen Lord during your mealtimes with other people. It is important to open a meal with prayer; prayer that takes place *during* a meal should be silent unless special concerns are voiced that would benefit from prayer.

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