



Rooted in God's Presence

Practices for Spiritual Growth

Valley Christian Church
Wednesday Night Adult Study
March 16 – May 11



***Taste and see that the LORD is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.***

– Psalm 34:8 NIV

Why spiritual practices matter today

We are living in a time of tremendous unrest and uncertainty, and for many of us it is difficult to remain grounded in God's presence. There are endless distractions which compete for our attention and time. Our culture conspires to pull us away from the core of what is most important—our love for God and our love for each other. Throughout the church's history, Christian leaders returned to ancient spiritual practices to combat our tendency to drift away from God. There is a renewed interest in rediscovering what it means to seek God through prayer, silence, fasting, and other time-tested practices. You are joining a revival of an ancient movement.

God is calling you into his presence

You were made to be in a relationship with the God of the universe. God deeply loves you and longs to draw you into his healing presence. Have you felt his gentle nudge? If you're searching for a way to get closer to your creator, spiritual practices are a means to bring you before the throne of God so he can do transforming work within you.

A bit about the course leader

Tessa Pinkstaff has been a member of Valley Christian Church since 2011. She is a project manager and grant writer at Luther Seminary in St. Paul and her work focuses on innovation in the church. Tessa is passionate about spiritual practices as a means for developing an intimate relationship with God. She has taught introductory workshops on the practices and currently leads a weekly scripture meditation webcast for pastors around the nation. Tessa is also co-writing a book on how to lead innovation and spiritual practices in the church. She is in her final year of earning a Master of Arts in Ministry from Bethel Seminary, and she will pursue a certificate in spiritual direction from Christos in Lino Lakes after graduation. Tessa has a B.A. in clinical psychology from the University of Northwestern–St. Paul.



Course schedule

Week 1: March 16 | Introduction to Spiritual Practices

Week 2: March 23 | Intercessory Prayer

Week 3: March 30 | Simplicity

Week 4: April 6 | Fasting

No session on April 13 during Easter week.

Week 5: April 20 | Scripture Meditation

Week 6: April 27 | Centering Prayer

Week 7: May 4 | Silence and Solitude

Week 8: May 11 | Framework for Life and Spiritual Storytelling

Weekly rhythm

Each week we'll begin with prayer and a focus verse that helps us see how God's word provides a foundation for each of the spiritual practices. We'll spend the first part of the session discussing the questions and sharing our experiences from the previous week—our successes, our failures, and everything in between. Then we'll learn about the featured practice for the week and participate in exercises designed to get us thinking about what God wants to do in us through the practice. We'll conclude with focus questions that we'll address at the start of the next session.

Invitation to retreat



There will be an opportunity for you to practice what you've learned by participating in a silent retreat during either of the first two weekends in May. We have reserved four private hermitages (retreat cabins) on both **May 6-8** and **May 13-15** (Fri-Sun) at **Pacem in Terris**, a Catholic retreat center in St. Francis, Minnesota (about an hour north of the Twin Cities).

The suggested donation is \$115 per night, which includes lodging and a food basket. Scholarships are available. Look for the sign-up sheet where you can select your weekend and confirm your stay. Learn more about the hermitage experience at www.paceminterris.org.

PAH-chem in TARE-is means "peace on earth" in Latin.



Participant covenant

During my time in this course, I will do my best to:

- Be present with and attentive to others
- Listen carefully and respectfully
- Speak honestly about my experiences if I choose to share
- Respect others' wishes to refrain from sharing
- Ensure that everyone who wants to share has an opportunity to do so
- Be open and curious about learning something new

Permission to listen

You will be encouraged to share about your experiences each week. However, we want this to be a space where you can come and learn regardless of whether you are actively engaged in the practices. If at any point you do not wish to share, you are invited to use this phrase:

"I'm here to listen and learn."

No matter where you find yourself, you are welcome to be in this community and to discover the unique journey God is calling you to take. Blessings to you as we begin!



Week 1: Introduction to Spiritual Practices

Come near to God and he will come near to you.

–James 4:8a NIV

Seeking God's presence

Our loving God desires to be in a relationship with us. He created us for fellowship with him and he longs for us to join him in his presence. Being near to God changes us as we become aligned with his character and begin to share his desires for the world. We are slowly transformed into our truest selves through repeated exposure to God's abundant healing, grace, and love. God does this work. Our role is to surrender and give him access.

Things that help or hinder us

Our perception of God's nearness ebbs and flows throughout our spiritual journey. At times God may be especially close and accessible. At other times, he may appear distant. Yet God is always with us regardless of whether we experience his presence. Part of our faith is learning to trust him when he seems far away. Here are some concepts that either help or hinder our ability to connect with God.

Encouragements

- We are invited to access God without a mediator (1 Peter 2:4-5; Hebrews 4:14-16)
- God wants intimacy with us (Jeremiah 31:33; Acts 17:26-28)
- God will reveal himself to us if we seek him (Matthew 7:7-8)
- Jesus promised to remain with us (Matthew 28:20a)

Obstacles

- We need Jesus first to understand spiritual things (1 Corinthians 1:18)
- We may get discouraged by sin or spiritual attacks (Job 2:3; Psalm 32:3-4)
- We need to better understand ourselves and God (Psalm 139:13-14; John 4:24)



Explaining the practices

Spiritual practices come to us from centuries of Christian tradition. They are ancient tools that help us connect with God because they enable us to experience him in fresh and dynamic ways. The practices place us in God's presence so he can do transforming work within us. Perhaps the easiest way to clarify what we mean by the practices is to consider what they *are* and also what they *aren't*.

What spiritual practices are:

- They are a means to engage with God's presence.
- They are encouraged as part of healthy spiritual growth.
- They are part of the regular rhythm of our Christian life.
- They are choices we make for developing our relationship with God.
- They are present throughout the Bible.
- They are modeled by Jesus.

What spiritual practices are not:

- They are not ways to earn favor with God.
- They are not just for "super saints."
- They are not about success or achievement.
- They are not exhaustively defined.
- They are not obligations.



Listing and categorizing the practices

Here are brief examples of Christian spiritual practices. It can be helpful to think about the practices as falling into two distinct categories: *engagement* and *abstinence*. Yet just as there is no definitive list of practices, there is no one right way to categorize them. What matters most is actually experiencing the practices so we can draw near to God.

Practices of engagement

Engagement practices involve activity as we say *yes* to participating in God's kingdom. These are practices that involve **doing** or **taking action**.



Centering prayer

In this type of prayer, we are invited to be still before God. We submit our physical bodies and our thoughts, communing with God for the purpose of letting ourselves, others, and the world be changed.



Intercessory prayer

We pray on behalf of others in this practice. We surrender our own understanding of what is best for people as we listen for God's leading on what they truly need.



Scripture meditation

This is a devotional reading of scripture that involves reflecting deeply on God's word and discovering what it means for your life or the life of your community.



Scripture study

This is an analytical reading of scripture that includes exploring what the author wanted to convey to the original audience and also to us. It involves determining the meaning behind biblical texts.



Service

This practice fosters humility as we put others' needs before our own. Our acts extend outward to family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, community members, and even those we consider our enemies.



Spiritual storytelling

This practice involves both telling and listening to stories about God's presence and movement in our daily lives. It includes speaking or writing about times when God was noticeably active.



Practices of abstinence

Abstinence practices disengage us as we say *no* to things that may be unhelpful to us. These are practices that are about **not doing** or **surrender**.



Fasting

This practice involves abstaining from food (but not water) for spiritual reasons. Fasts may also involve putting limits on technology or media usage. The purpose of any fast is to bring our appetites into submission to God so they don't control us.



Lament

This form of prayer is a conversation with God that allows us to openly express our most difficult feelings. Lament moves us from pain to praise. This practice can be done individually or communally.



Silence and solitude

This is a mental and sometimes physical separation from the distractions of everyday life in order to better focus on God and his voice.



Simplicity

This practice involves trusting in God's provision and putting his kingdom first. It results in a healthy relationship with our possessions and a willingness to give generously to others.



A menu of possibilities

There are many possible practices to choose from. You are encouraged to try several practices to see which ones best help you encounter God. If you need help getting started, you might consider areas of your life where God is calling you into further spiritual growth.

Spiritual practice

Desired growth

Centering prayer	➔	a quiet heart that is able to rest in God alone
Fasting	➔	being able to relinquish something you cherish in order to seek God first
Lament	➔	a deeper trust in God, and compassion for yourself and others, as you bring suffering to him
Intercessory prayer	➔	the ability to pray according to God's desires for the world and for others
Scripture meditation	➔	the ability to hear God's voice speaking through scripture
Scripture study	➔	a deepened love for God through understanding his word and what it means for your life
Service	➔	love for others and increased capacity for listening and understanding their needs
Silence and solitude	➔	the ability to be at peace amidst the noise and distraction of daily life
Simplicity	➔	using possessions and talents for God's glory while limiting their hold on your affections
Spiritual storytelling	➔	the ability to see where and how God is at work in your life and in the lives of others
Worship	➔	to honor and enjoy God as the source of all goodness

Adapted from *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun



Role of the community

Spiritual practices might seem like a private part of our Christian walk, especially because many of them are about personally experiencing God's presence. But the church community plays an important role in helping us to remain faithful on this journey. Spiritual mentors and friends can pray on our behalf against discouragement and offer accountability when the road becomes difficult. Moreover, some of the practices take place directly in the context of the community, such as worship and communion.



Prayer practice

Gracious Father, thank you for prompting me to take this journey into deeper fellowship with you. I pray that you would help me experience your presence through these practices. I ask for your protection against discouragement and misunderstanding, both for me and also for others in this course. Open my eyes to your truth and awaken my heart with a profound longing for you. I pray these things through Jesus Christ, your precious Son who made relationship with you possible through his loving sacrifice. Amen.

Key things to remember

- You are likely already doing some of the practices as part of your Christian journey.
- Give yourself permission to experiment and choose the practice(s) that best help you encounter God. You don't need to do all of the practices.
- Embrace your creativity around the practices. Adapt one or more around your own interests. You have freedom and flexibility to make something new.
- The practices have no impact on God's tremendous love for you. You don't need to do them perfectly or even well.
- You are encouraged to find spiritual partners who can support you along the way.
- God will do the transforming work within you when you come into his presence.

