

# SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR LENT

## *Seven Practices for Reflection*



Lent is the season leading up to Easter. As early as the fourth century, the church counted back 40 days from Easter (excluding Sundays) in order to observe a time of reflection and preparation for the events of Holy Week. Lent provides an opportunity to engage our Christian faith by looking at the reality of our lives: examining our ways, confessing, and repenting from sin, meditating on the plan of God in the suffering and vicarious death of Jesus, celebrating the great gift of salvation, and marveling in the resurrection. We pay attention because these weeks are rich with the greatest themes of our faith: forgiveness, suffering, atonement, redemption, sin, obedience, offering, prayer, mercy, divinity, salvation, love.

As Lent begins, it's a good time to clear our minds, examine our hearts, and focus on the grace of God shown through Christ. This booklet includes information about seven disciplines, or practices, that may help you do just that. Each discipline includes Scriptures that pertain to that practice, and exercises for reflection. Follow the Spirit's leading as you choose exercises and spend time with him.

Disciplines do not guarantee that we will "get somewhere" in our spiritual journey. These moments are less about learning or achieving an end, and more about simply being with God, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak, and having the opportunity to respond. They may also bring to light questions, concerns, sins, or memories that you may want to process. You may wish to practice and share these Lenten disciplines with a friend, small group, or family.

## Week 1: Solitude

The desire of solitude is to “leave people behind and enter into time alone with God.” Solitude is the basis for many of the other disciplines we will be exploring during Lent. Emilie Griffin says there is more to solitude than just spending time by yourself. Solitude “is your chance to detach from the opinions of others, to forgive some people who have made you angry, to come to grips with the way other people are getting in the way of your relationship with God”.

Silence and solitude help us sort our crowded lives and hear God better. We have space to let our thoughts, emotions and mixed up, busy brains slow, still, and then allow the Holy Spirit to bring fresh perspective, order, and priority. Most importantly, in the quieted space that solitude allows, we can experience the love God has for us, as he gathers our fragmented bits and pieces and shapes our souls with careful mercy.

Scripture:

1. Matthew 4: 1-11
2. Luke 6: 12-19
3. Matthew 14: 13-21
4. Matthew 14: 22-27
5. Luke 22:39-46

Exercises:

1. During this week, choose a time or several times that you can be alone. During this time intentionally place yourself in the presence of God. - Simply be alone with God.
2. Consider: how can I arrange for times of quiet and separation from daily obligations on a regular basis?
3. Spend a few minutes sitting quietly. Think about the following questions: How and when do you resist being alone? When have you felt most comfortable being alone? Most uncomfortable? What sense of God do you have when you are alone?
4. Consider the above Scripture passages which give examples of Jesus’ practice of withdrawing to pray. How did Jesus’ time with his Father help him face the demands and pressures placed on him by the crowds?
5. Set aside time to listen to God and write down what you hear God saying to you.

Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*

Emilie Griffin, *Wilderness Time: A Guide for Spiritual Retreat*

## Week 2: Praying Scripture

Praying Scripture is an approach to prayer which allows God to enter our praying through the words of Scripture. It is a way of engaging the Biblical text with a heart alert, listening for what the Holy Spirit helps us notice through the stories, people, words, experiences and lessons of the Bible. Praying with Scripture is not an exercise to study or learn, but to help us grow in trust and to experience God's love. It is a way to be with God freed from expectations or results (such as a lesson learned, or a verse applied) and open to His speaking into all that he is doing in and through us.

Set aside some time to be alone (practice solitude!). Choose a Scripture passage to pray with. Suggested Scriptures to begin with are in the list below and are part of some of the exercises but you may have other Scripture passages that you feel led to. Words or verses may catch your attention. Stop and consider them as an invitation to be with God in prayer.

Scripture:

1. Psalm 139
2. Psalm 32
3. Ephesians 1: 15-21
4. Psalm 19
5. Psalm 145

Exercises:

1. Become quiet. Take some time to let your mind settle. Turn to Psalm 139. Slowly read the psalm aloud substituting your own name for the pronouns *me* and *I*. Take your time. Respond to God's compassionate knowing all of you.
2. Turn to Psalm 32. Offer yourself to God in repentance. Read the psalm one verse at a time. Stop after each verse and talk to God about what you have read. Let the words of the psalmist comfort you. The writers of the Psalms were very human, struggling with fear and sin, just as you do.
3. Use Scripture to pray for the church. Place yourself in the presence of God and pray one of Paul's prayers for the church—Ephesians 1:15-21 is a good one. Listen for the prayer God places on your heart for the church—for West Church but also the Church world-wide.
4. Is there a story in Scripture that reminds you of your life or a situation in your life? Go to that story and begin meditating on it. What is God saying to you? How might the life of a biblical character help shape your prayers?
5. Is there a prayer in Scripture you can make your own as a love song to God? Memorize it and say it often to the Lord.

[Exercises and description of the practice are from Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*]

## Week 3: Fasting

“Even though we know fasting is found throughout the Bible, some of us have misgivings about the practice...” says Lynne Baab, in her book *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond our Appetites*. She provides this simple definition: “Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific period of time for a spiritual purpose.” Denying ourselves foods for a time in order to know Jesus more vividly as the source of our sustenance and our truest food, is one form of keeping a fast. We can fast also from particular activities (such as criticism, online shopping, gaming, or watching shows) in order to rediscover our deepest hungers. Fasting draws us closer to God, making more space for God in both our hearts and in our schedules... “It weans us from our preoccupations and attunes us to God and God’s concerns and in some mysterious way strengthens our prayers.”

[Excerpts from *Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God* by Bobby Gross.]

Scripture:

1. Deuteronomy 8:2-3
2. Joel 2: 12-13
3. Isaiah 58
4. Matthew 6: 16-18
5. Acts 13:1-3

Exercises: Consider the following ways of fasting and choose one to try this week:

- A partial fast by either cutting out certain foods (e.g., chocolate or caffeine) or certain meals.
- A normal fast--eating no food for the day but drinking liquids, either water or juice
- A complete fast in which one consumes nothing at all (and should be limited to no more than 2 days).
- Abstaining from food, drink, shopping, desserts, and so on to intentionally be with God
- Abstaining from media: TV, radio, music, e-mail, cell phones, social media, or computer games to allow space to listen to the voice of Jesus.
- Abstaining from habits or comforts: elevators, reading and sports in order to give God undivided attention.

As you fast, reflect on the following questions:

1. What is your attitude toward fasting or self-denial?
2. In what ways do you currently deny yourself?
3. When has self-denial brought you something good?
4. What has the experience of fasting been like for you? Has it freed you to pay attention to Jesus?
5. When fasting is difficult, share your thoughts and feelings with Jesus. What does Jesus say to you?

[Questions are from Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*]

## Week 4: Examen

The examen is a practice of paying attention to God's presence in your day. If you are someone who gets so busy that you ask, "Where was God today?" this is the exercise for you. In a time of prayer, ask the Holy Spirit to help you answer these two questions: Where in the day did I have the deepest sense of connection with God, others, myself? Where in the day did I have the least sense of connection?

These questions may help you to recognize God's presence in your experiences and help you develop a discernment and openness to God's presence in and through the activities of the day. Other ways of asking the two questions include:

- For what moment today am I most grateful? For what moment today am I least grateful?
- When did I give and receive the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today?
- What was the most life-giving part of my day? What was the most life-thwarting part of my day?
- Where did I experience peace, joyfulness, or calm maybe even despite circumstances? Where did I find a sense of loss, heaviness, or aloneness in the midst of circumstances that possibly didn't warrant such a reaction?

[Adapted from Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*]

### Scripture

1. Psalm 119:59–60
2. Psalm 139: 1-12
3. Lamentations 3:40
4. 1 Corinthians 11:28-32
5. 2 Corinthians 13:5

### Exercises

Each day this week set aside time to become quiet before God. This is ideally done at the end of the day but could be done the next morning. Ask for God's help. Give thanks for the gifts of this day. Begin to reflect on the different activities and encounters with people, and the thoughts and emotions you experienced throughout the day. Ask some of the examen questions. Reflect on where God was in the highs and lows of the day. Choose one feature from the day and bring it before God in prayer. Rejoice in those times that you were brought closer to God and ask forgiveness for those times when you resisted God's presence in your life. Invite God to be part of your future. Where do you see patterns? What do you need God's help with?

[Rama Ziegenhals, Pax Center materials on The Prayer of Examen]

## Week 5: Confession

Confession awakens us to what is really true about ourselves. And finding what is true about ourselves opens us up to change with the compassionate help of Jesus. While we generally associate confession with the discovery and admission of sin, we may want to consider that we need to seek a deeper confession. We may need to be set free from how we develop identities based on what we do, what we have, and how we want people to think of us. We may need to confess our “strengths” that keep us self-dependent instead of God-dependent. We may need to confess how much we “help” others only to gain a good image, or how active we are because it is our way to find acclaim and admiration, or to earn God’s love.

Confession can be done privately or, you may choose to talk with trusted person. Adele Calhoun says that to confess is “to surrender my weaknesses and faults to the forgiving love of Christ and intentionally desire and embrace practices that lead to transformation.”

### Scriptures

1. Proverbs 28:13
2. Psalm 32:1-5
3. Psalm 38:15-18
4. James 5:16
5. 1 John 1:5-9

### Exercises

1. Does your confession tend to be general—“forgive my sins, Dear Lord”—rather than specifically naming your sins to God? What does the lack of specific confession do to your awareness of the truth of your sin? What are some ways you avoid admitting your feelings?
2. What experiences have affected your ability to give and receive forgiveness? Talk to God about what that means.
3. Imagine you are in a safe place, surrounded by the love of God. Ask God to help you see yourself as he sees you. Remember he sees you absolutely and with love. Using the Ten Commandments as a guide, write down your sins. When you have finished, go through each commandment, asking God to forgive you and help you to change. -
4. Set aside some time for confession and self-examination. Then ask yourself, “Who have I injured recently through thoughtlessness, neglect, anger and so on? As the Holy Spirit brings people to mind, confess your feelings about these people to God. Ask for forgiveness and help to change. Pray about what action you can take to begin to heal the relationship.
5. Are there ways—after I admit my faults—I can relax and let them go? What steps can I take to keep from reliving over and over the wrongs I have done?

[Exercises adapted from Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Part of Question 1 and Question 5 from *Spiritual Classics* Edited by Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin]

## Week 6: Rest

Up to this point, we have explored some practices that may have been difficult. This week, we will focus on rest, being reminded that God cares for our whole selves, body, mind and spirit. Rest may seem a strange practice for Lent, but without a correct understanding, we cannot be prepared for the fullness of life God intends. Intentional rest is almost unknown in our society today. We may confuse rest with pleasure-seeking or leisure activities. We may feel guilty if we are not doing something productive or may feel antsy or bored with nothing to do.

But we are limited, and our bodies were made to require rest. God is our example when he rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day. He not only gives us an example to follow but provides a picture of how he exists... in perfect rest, knowing that all things are in his hands and under his control. When he invites us to rest, he invites us into a trustful, divine gift. He invites us into a way of being with him that is our best demonstration of faith. You may want to explore the difference between “chronos” (time under the clock), or “kairos” (time as a quality or gift or sacred space). This week consider your need for rest. How does God provide rest for you?

### Scriptures:

1. Exodus 23:12
2. Psalm 116:5-7
3. Isaiah 58: 13-14
4. Matthew 11: 28-29
5. Mark 6:30-32

### Exercises:

1. Sit with God and reflect on these questions: What exhausts you or keeps you working past your limits? Where and when do you most deeply rest?
2. Write down what a perfect day of rest and recreating would look like to you. Is it possible? Plan when you can take this day and schedule it on your calendar.
3. Intentionally place yourself in the presence of God, then do something you delight in go for a walk, take a nap, talk to a friend, have a cup of coffee, play a game. Enjoy yourself in God. Receive the gift of rest. Tell God what happens in you as you try to rest.
4. Consider whether or not your tiredness is about body or soul. What kinds of rest would refresh your body? What kinds of rest would refresh your soul? Choose two times this week when you will intentionally enter into rest for body and soul.
5. Think about your childhood experience of play. What was it like for you? How does your past experience affect your ability to play today? What is fun for you right now? Plan some time for play and fun in your week.
6. Choose a Scripture that speaks of trusting God and make that a prayer about how you want to rest.

[Adapted from Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*]

## Week 7: Prayer and Meditation on God's Word

Thoughtful observation of Scripture can be a very active way of praying that engages the mind and heart and stirs up thoughts and emotions. Meditating, examining, or contemplating God's activity in Biblical passages is a way of "looking long" and engaging. We know that Jesus used the imagery of story to capture God's truth and engage us. This week we accompany Jesus during the last days of his life by imagining the scenes as he experienced them. Take time to quiet yourself before God. Read the Scripture passages slowly. Pay attention to the details: signs, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings of the event. At some point, imagine yourself in the scene. Who would you be? Use your imagination to dig deeper into the story so that God may communicate with you in a personal way.

Scripture:

1. Matthew 21: 1-11 Jesus' entry into Jerusalem
2. Matthew 26: 17-30 Last Supper
3. John 13: 1-17 Foot Washing
4. Matthew 26: 36-46 In the Garden
5. Luke 23: 26-49 Crucifixion

Exercise: After considering and imagining any of these moments in Christ's last week in human form, ask the Spirit any questions you have about why this was the plan of God. Ask why this was the plan of God for you. Allow the response of God to form in your mind and heart.

In a similar way, reflect on yourself and ask:

How do I want to respond to Jesus for his actions on my behalf?

What is he asking of me?

What am I doing for him?

How can I worship and live in gratefulness?

Speak to him about whatever comes to your mind.

[Adapted from Kevin O'Brien, *The Ignatian Adventure*]