

Core Spiritual Practices

Five habits that will help us grow and the church to flourish

by Mark Brouwer

As followers of Jesus Christ, we seek to experience the abundant life that Jesus promises in John 10:10. To do this, we engage in a set of practices that help us experience the reality and power of God in our lives, and infuse our lives with purpose and meaning.

These practices are not a simple “checklist” or things we do to earn some kind of spiritual status. They are deep habits that form our lives and make the “faith” we profess real and experiential.

Of course there is nothing new about these practices, and we may have already been engaging regularly in all of them. But our experiment is to engage more deliberately in them, believing that doing so will stimulate our spiritual lives, and bless others.

The five practices are: (a) to set aside some time each day to quiet ourselves and connect with God, (b) to set aside a day each week for rest and worship, gathering with other believers, (c) to engage in meaningful service, investing our time, talent, and treasure in building the Kingdom of God, (d) to live missionally, finding ways to bless and include several people in our lives each week, and (e) to live with love in our relationships with others, especially those in the church, through listening, honesty, directness, and compassion.

1. The practice of a daily retreat time

This practice is essential, especially given the busyness of our lives today. It is a time that we set aside to quiet ourselves and connect to God through reading scripture or other spiritual teaching, meditating, and praying.

This is the time we intentionally quiet the voice of our “inner chatterbox” ... the old self (sometimes called “the ego”). Instead of tuning into all the “to do’s,” frustrations, and “things to worry about”, we let them go ... giving them over to God. We don’t feel guilt for having all these thoughts come up during our quiet time, we simply turn them over to God.

This is the time when we seek to learn, to hear from God, to be reminded of the truths about who we are, who God is, and what really matters in life. It is a time that our perspective changes, as we get the chance to recalibrate ourselves by looking at our lives from the Spirit’s perspectives.

There is no set length of time mandated for this. We just do it every day, and do it for as long as we can, or least as long as we need to.

2. The practice of weekly sabbath ... time for rest, renewal, and gathering with our spiritual community

Like the daily retreat time, this is a simple commitment that seems to have a magic to it -- that when we do it, it provides blessing and support to us on many different levels:

- It brings rest and renewal to us, because we living in the natural rhythm that God has built into creation, rather than running and pushing with activity seven days a week like a machine.
- It forces us to grow in our trust in God, and it undermines the old self / ego, because if we stop to rest we will always be bombarded with a mental list of dozens of things we “should be doing” and “need to take care of.” The weekly time of renewal reminds us that God is in control, and our lives will continue to be good and blessed even if we don’t push and stress and fret to make things happen.
- This habit puts us into a place of worship with other believers in our community. We get the blessing and encouragement of being around like-minded friends. It prevents us from being isolated and lonely, because it is a time to gather with others in community.
- During our gathering time we are nurtured spiritually in our church service. We’re reminded about the truth about God, ourselves, the world, and our place in it. We are encouraged to worship ... to lift our eyes beyond ourselves.

As with all the spiritual practices, this is not something to be legalistic about. Our schedules are fluid, and sometimes things come up on Sunday that we need to do. And sometimes things that might be considered “work” to some might be renewing for us. The point is simply to make room in our lives for rest and renewal on that day, to the best of our ability. We try to take care of the “work” and responsibilities on Saturdays, so we can rest and be restored on Sundays. And of course, we gather in church whenever we are able. Sometimes we’re gone, or not feeling well.

3. The Practice of Service

This practice is probably the most easy to understand, and its place in the spiritual life most obvious. God created us to be containers and channels of his blessings. He blesses us and those blessings overflow into the lives of others. This habit is what keeps us from withholding.

The practice of service means that we intentionally seek to invest our lives ... giving of our time, our talents, and our treasure.

In some senses, this practice is natural and instinctual. We WANT to invest ourselves in things we find meaningful. We want our lives to count. So we look for ways to use our time and talents to help other people. Some of us do this in careers that help others. Some of us do this by getting involved in programs and activities outside of the church that help and bless other people. But we also use our gifts and our time to serve God through the ministries of the church. It's a balance, and there may likely be seasons where we invest more heavily in one area than another.

This practice is also a discipline and can sometimes be a challenge for us. We give of ourselves because it's right to do so, even though sometimes it might feel fun or rewarding. We learn lessons and grow in faith in ways that can only happen if we are involved in service. As has often been said, "Christianity is not a spectator sport." We have been trained by our 21st century world to be spectators and consumers ... but the abundant life can only be experienced when we are players in the game, and we're getting our hands dirty in service.

We give God a portion of our income ... always being reminded that our blessings come from God, and that giving them to others blesses others, but it also blesses us. It helps break the power of materialism and lack of faith on our part.

4. The Practice of Blessing and Including

God intends for His blessings in our lives to spill over and positively influence the people around us. We are to be salt and light in our world. He has placed us in work environments, neighborhoods, schools, and social groups so that we can be a blessing to the people in those groups. "Living missionally" is the practice of reminding ourselves of this, and seeking to reach out and bring blessings whenever and wherever we can.

On the one hand it would seem that this should just happen automatically. Light just shines, and gives light to everyone around it. Just by being itself, salt affects the objects it comes into contact with.

The problem is that our modern world is so busy, and our relationships are often so scattered and short-lived, that "living missionally" usually doesn't happen unless we are intentional about it. So we make it a goal to do two things:

- (1) To find ways to bless several people each week, at least one of whom is not from our church. We "bless others" by sharing an especially kind or encouraging word, or doing something helpful or beneficial to them.
- (2) To find ways of including several people in our lives each week, at least one of whom is not from our church. The way we include other people in our lives is often centered

around food, either having people over for a meal, meeting in a restaurant, or having coffee together and visiting.

It might be tempting to dismiss this practice as “too extroverted” for people who are introverts, or “too hard” for those who’ve grown up in church contexts and only seem to have “church friends.” Once again, we’re not approaching this from the standpoint of legalism ... this is a practice we are seeking to grow in.

If we feel discouraged about this habit, we will very likely be surprised at the change that will take place in our lives once we start making this a matter of prayer, and start intentionally seeking out opportunities to bless and include people.

5. The practice of Living with Love

Writers in the New Testament talk at length about the importance of the quality of loving relationships we have with one another in the church. Jesus goes so far as to say that this is *the very thing* that will demonstrate to people that we are truly his disciples. It is the second part of the Great Commandment ... to “love our neighbor as ourselves.”

This habit does not come easily or naturally for many of us. In modern Western society, we’ve seen the breakdown of community and family bonds, and many people struggle to develop and maintain healthy, close relationships. Many people haven’t learned the skills, or developed the character qualities required to bear with others who are different and difficult, and/or to work through the conflict that inevitably arises when relationships move beyond superficiality.

In many ways, a healthy church is both a training ground and proving ground for these skills of relationships. Being a follower of Jesus causes us to be especially aware of how we relate to others. As Paul reminds us in I Corinthians 13, we can be super-dedicated, and appear super-spiritual, but if we don’t have love ... it’s pointless.

So how do we focus on living with love? We pay special attention, giving ourselves reminders about, and frequently reflecting on how we’re doing in:

- listening -- learning to really hear the other person’s perspective and feelings
- honesty -- having the courage to let someone know what we are feeling and thinking, even when it’s hard to say (of course doing so with compassion ... see below)
- directness -- making a commitment to working through conflict with someone, rather than triangling with others, and talking about that person behind their back

- compassion -- learning how, and disciplining ourselves, to speak in ways that are honest but don't inflict harm (some people refer to this as "non-violent communication")

Conclusion

So those are the five core spiritual practices I'm suggesting that we highlight and build our ministry around. If people were to devote themselves to these things -- more so than they are right now -- what could happen in their lives? What could happen in our church? I don't know about you, but I'm excited to think of the possibilities.

So my suggestion is this ... as leaders in the church, we seek to live out these practices for the next few months, and I will plan on putting together some kind of special message series, and/or some other way to launch them this Fall to the church as a whole. I suspect that we might learn some things along the way. Maybe we're missing something? Maybe something is getting too much emphasis?

I just know that these kinds of things can sound like a really good idea, but when you try to implement them they don't work. So let's try to put them into practice, and see what we learn. What do you think?