

Begin with Silence and Prayer (5 Minutes)

Gather together as a community group in a comfortable setting; around a table, on a couch, a living room floor, etc. Have someone lead a quick prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to lead and guide your time together. Then spend a moment in silence together. Instruct your group,

“As you sit in silence, invite the Holy Spirit to quiet your heart and mind from distractions. Ask God if there is anything he would like to share with you during this time.”

Why silence? In our overcrowded, busy world, silence (even if for only a few minutes) cuts through the noise and allows space to calm your mind and your heart before God. Close this group time of silence with a moment of gratitude, thanking God for the opportunity to be together.

Review Last Week’s Practice (10 Minutes)

After spending a few minutes catching up on life events over the past week or two, talk through the following debrief questions focusing on the practice that was given last week.

How did it go?

What were some of the “one anothers” that you felt led to focus on?

What did you notice about living more intentionally into life with others by embodying these “one anothers?”

What did this particular practice show you about your relationship with God?

Debrief the Teaching (10 minutes)

If you have a large group, it may be best to divide into small groups of three to four people. Spend a moment catching up on life and then talk through the following questions:

Did you listen to this week’s sermon? What was the biggest take away from the message?

How did this teaching reshape the way you view your life experiences and their relation to you following Jesus?

Discuss this Overview (10-15 Minutes)

Regardless of whether or not you follow Jesus, life brings about moments of great joy and euphoria and moments of despair and deep anguish. Both of these times - the good and the painful - have deep formative potential. The role of a Jesus follower is to walk through these experiences with intentionality, seeking to reflect and walk with God in these moments. Being alert to the moments of joy in our lives, reminds us that God is working in this world to bring about its flourishing.

Name one or two moments of deep joy in your life that have shaped you and caused you to understand God differently.

This could be the birth of a child, marriage, the beauty of a sunset, a meal with great friends, or the laughter of a child, etc.

The difficult, painful, gut-wrenching moments also have the potential to be significant catalysts for spiritual formation. As a Jesus follower, the most difficult aspect of life can actually function as an incubator to expedite your formation into the image of Jesus. While God does not cause these painful life experiences, God is working in them to bring about greater depth of spiritual formation. Ironically, the times in our life that we do absolutely everything we can to avoid, and pray away, or run from, are often the times that are the most formative.

Have you ever considered your life experiences as part of your spiritual formation?

What are examples of some of the most formative life experiences you have gone through?

Open the Bible Together (10-15 Minutes)

Have someone read Romans 5:1-5 out loud.

God uses the circumstances of our lives, both blessings and sufferings, to form and shape us. While these circumstances may largely be beyond our control, our role is to pay attention and be present to the circumstances of our lives, surrendering to God and trusting him in all circumstances. For it is often these circumstances that the Holy Spirit can use to bring about profound seasons of change and formation.

The apostle Paul is no stranger to life altering experiences. In his letter to the church in Rome, he details how these circumstances give way to growth. In the text above, Paul opens with the assertion that we have been justified through our faith in Jesus Christ. It is this relational standing that provides the foundation to navigate life's experiences, and it is this firm conviction, that our peace has been achieved through Christ, which ultimately becomes the basis of our hope.

How does our standing, "hav[ing] been justified through faith, we have peace with God...", affect the way we approach the difficult circumstances that come our way?

Paul then transitions into talking about suffering and its work in producing hope. This isn't something that happens all at once, but rather, Paul notes a process from which one is taken from suffering to hope. Some of the most difficult but formative times in our lives take place during this difficult process.

Paul details the process in this way, "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope," think back over the times of formation in your own life. How have you seen this process at work?

Lastly, verse five closes this section by reminding us that our hope is firm because of the movement of God's love that has been "poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." As we navigate these experiences in our own lives, we lean into the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide us, becoming attentive to the ways we are being formed.

Thinking through everything we have discussed in this series on Spiritual Formation, what does it look like to "lean into the presence of the Holy Spirit" during difficult life circumstances?

What is one practical thing you can do this week to become more attentive to the Holy Spirit? This could be a new spiritual practice (like the one detailed below), a time of journaling and prayer to help navigate your own thoughts with God, or spending time with a trusted friend discussing what you are going through.

Something to Practice Individually this Week - The Prayer of Examen (5-10 Minutes)

Below is a practice that everyone in your group can try out this coming week. Spend a few minutes reading this out loud with the group and discuss any questions that may arise.

This week you have the opportunity to practice the Prayer of Examen, a spiritual exercise credited to St Ignatius of Loyola. At the heart of the practice is increasingly becoming aware of God's presence and the work of the Holy Spirit throughout your everyday life.

It is an exercise of remembering. Through five prayer moments (Settle, Rejoice, Replay, Repent, and Resolve) you are invited to concentrate on experiences and encounters from the past 24 hours of your life. The beauty of this practice is its simplicity; it is more a guide than a prescription. If one of the prayer moments feels especially important on a given day, feel free to spend most of the time in that portion. The purpose is to increase awareness of God's presence throughout your day, not to accomplish or finish a task.

A few notes before jumping in...

Find a comfortable and relatively quiet location that is conducive for reflection and prayer.

The practice doesn't need to be a certain length - it could be as little as ten minutes or as long as a few hours. Again, the goal isn't to finish a task, but to allow a space to reflect with God over the past 24 hours.

It might be helpful to journal your thoughts and recollections, feel free to write them down in a journal while you are praying.

Consider sharing your experiences with a close friend, allow encouragement and insight from others to influence you and cheer you on, and when appropriate offer the same encouragement to the other.

The Prayer of Examen

Step #1 - SETTLE - Spend a few moments in quiet prayer. Spending time in silence before God has a way of calming your mind and slowing your heart to be more aware of God's presence. After a few moments in silence, offer the following words as a prayer...

Gracious God, in these moments please remind me of your presence and generosity, and give me the wisdom and courage to live gracefully with myself, others, and the world you have wonderfully made. Amen.

Below are a few scriptures you can use as prayers during this time as well.

Psalm 145:18 - "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth."

Psalm 145:9-10 - "The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All you have made will praise you, O Lord; your saints will extol you."

Step #2 - REJOICE - What happened today?

Our over-packed lives can rob us of the opportunity to learn from the past, to see how yesterday might inform today. Spend a few moments replaying the last 24 hours, reviewing interactions with others, responses, feelings, and intentions. Give intentional focus on those events or moments in which gratitude wells up within you.

Playback, in your mind, the last 24 hours as if scenes of a movie .

Actively think through the events of the day, the interactions with people, and the moments of stress and grace.

Observe and remember those experiences and encounters and help your mind focus on the goodness and generosity of God.

Over the past 24 hours, for what are you most grateful? What makes you feel thankful?

Spend a few moments in gratitude to God, thanking God for these moments and encounters.

Use the following scripture as a prayer to God...

Ephesians 1:3 - Praise be to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens.

Step #3 - REPLAY - Where did I feel grace today? Where was God particularly present?

Begin to review those moments of your day again, try to look back objectively as you review. Rather than interpreting, justifying, or rationalizing, the intent is to observe and remember. Allow your mind to wander in the situations and use the following questions to help focus your thinking.

When or where in the past 24 hours were you cooperating most fully with God's action in your life? When were you resisting?

What habits and life patterns do you notice from the past day?

Use the following scriptures as a prayer to God.

Psalm 143:8b, 10 - "Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul...Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground."

Step #4 - REPENT - Where did I sin? Where do I need God's grace?

As you replayed the events of the day in the previous step, take one of those encounters and experiences and offer it to God. Be honest with yourself and with God about what caused that strong reaction - be it frustration, joy, or pain and try to name accurately which particular feeling it was that you felt.

If you can't identify a cause, ask God to reveal what may be the source. Be open to confronting your own shadow-side and your own culpability.

In what ways have you not lived into God's intention for you?

Spend time with God seeking forgiveness for the areas where you have missed the mark.

Step #5 - RESOLVE - Decide to live differently tomorrow, if need be.

Spend a few moments inviting God to show you how you could live differently tomorrow in light of the events of today.

You may need to ask for direction, share a concern, express gratitude, or simply resolve to make the necessary changes and move forward. Allow your observations to guide your response to God.

Talk with God about your desire to live differently, what patterns do you want to keep living tomorrow, and what patterns do you want to change starting tomorrow?

End your time with a moment of gratitude thanking God for this time. Thank God for his presence in this practice and throughout your day. Thank God for his patience and forgiveness.

Close in Prayer (5 Minutes)

Have someone close out your time in prayer. Thank God for the time together, and pray for each other's upcoming week.