



Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



Unit 3: The Way of Christ

Session 10: Spiritual Practices for Soul-Hungry Christians

A Coming of Age in my Relationship with God

My parents taught me to pray as a young child; we prayed before every meal and had an extended prayer time before bed. I always had the sense that God heard my prayers and that proved to be a great comfort to me.

Over the years, I tried various programs to read the Bible in a year. I also tried to keep up with Sunday School and youth group lessons and do any assigned reading we had been asked to complete, and all the while I sensed that God did indeed hear my prayers – although I did not always receive the answers for which I was hoping.

My prayer and devotional life changed drastically in the summer of 1993. I was an ordained elder, appointed as a lead pastor to a church in Richardson, Texas. While serving as a counselor at our conference's senior high camp, I received word that my mother had been in a horrible motor vehicle accident. I rushed from our conference center in Bridgeport, Texas, to the Greenville hospital before the helicopter air-lifted my mom to Dallas. By God's grace, I made it to Greenville just in time to see my mother before she was loaded onto the helicopter. The situation was grave. As a trained hospital chaplain, I knew how chaplains and other hospital staff related to loved ones of patients who had little hope of survival and my experience was all too familiar. I tried to cope with the shock while helping my dad understand the gravity of the situation. It was perhaps the most frightening day of my life. I cried out to God, literally, not caring that others might see me or hear me. I prayed regularly to God, but I rarely felt a desperate need for God's presence. I learned that day I did not have to "have it together" for God to hear me and respond to my need. I started out that morning as a young adult who was somewhat naïve about human suffering. I ended that day as a more mature adult, making life-and-death decisions on the part of a woman whom I loved dearly and still depended upon greatly.

The next several months were challenging due to my mother's long-term stay in the Intensive Care Unit. It

seemed that God was continually present through my dad and the spiritual care of my congregation. General acts of piety were a part of my continual prayer life. I sang hymns at my mom's bedside, read scripture, and even prepared for her memorial service. She died in September, the day before my birthday and ten days after we made the decision to remove her from life support.

As I look back on that time, I realize that the spiritual practices and disciplines that I had learned connected me deeply to God. I felt the Holy Spirit lead me through a dangerous, unfamiliar wilderness, and offer me peace and wisdom. God certainly sustained me, and it seemed my every need was provided for during that traumatic time. I am certain that all of this was part of God's provision for me and for my dad. The spiritual disciplines that I so desperately employed during that long summer have become the center of my life.

Works of Piety for Wesleyans

It is important for Wesleyan Christians to understand what we mean by the term **piety**. In a secular sense, when I think of someone being pious, I think of someone who acts "holier-than-thou" or who behaves as if she or he is better than other people. In our context, piety simply refers to our reverence for God; therefore, acts of piety are actions that enhance our relationship with God. We sometimes call these spiritual disciplines. There are many works of piety a person can experience, and one of the ones with which we are most familiar is prayer.

In Luke 18:9-14 we read: "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying,

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'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you; this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."¹

In this passage, the Pharisee might represent piety in a more secular context, while the tax collector might represent piety in a Wesleyan sense. Indeed, the more we can approach God honestly and openly, without pretense, the more authentic our relationship with God will become.

Around 1729, John's brother Charles Wesley (the great hymn writer) began to meet with a group of like-minded faculty and students at Oxford. They soon invited John to participate as well. They practiced spiritual disciplines together and separately, and held one another accountable for their Bible study, prayer, fasting, intentionality about receiving Holy Communion, and their work amongst the poor and imprisoned populations. Others derided them, calling them names to make fun of them: the "Holy Club," "Bible Moths," and "Methodists;" thus, the name of our denomination sprang from a small group of people intentionally practicing spiritual disciplines according to a method!

As the movement progressed, John and Charles Wesley demonstrated by preaching and by practice their belief that **works of mercy** (works of social holiness from Session 9), and **works of piety** (spiritual practices) were essential for a Christian's life of faith. A particularly striking characteristic of John was his humility when it came to living out his relationship with God through Jesus Christ.¹ According to Charles Yrigoyen in *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life*: "One of the most impressive things about John Wesley was his struggle to become the person he thought God wanted him to be, someone who was holy in heart and life. He was not a Christian theologian and church leader who lived above the world's conflicts and turmoil. He was realistic about the obstacles, doubts, failures, and crises with which faithful people must cope... He was aware that the Christian life has its peaks and valleys."²

John Wesley was especially interested in Christians receiving the "means of grace," special conduits through

which God's grace was made especially available to people (see Session 8). These included searching the scriptures, prayer, fasting, receiving Holy Communion, participating in Christian conferencing, and attending public worship.³ This is as true for us today as it was for the folks in The Holy Club in 1729. Acts of mercy and acts of piety all have their place among the means of grace.

Spiritual Practices for Soul-Hungry Christians

Times are tough, and our culture is going through a particularly tumultuous time. We faithful Christians wonder where God is in the midst of everything we see on the news. We are soul-hungry. We long for something solid in the midst of a world that seems to continually shift beneath us.

There are many resources we can use to strengthen our prayer life and Bible study. There are resources about ways to practice fasting (from food as well as from other things, i.e. social media, careless spending, bad language, etc.). Most of us have access to corporate worship and Holy Communion. Christian conferencing occurs anytime Christians intentionally gather to learn about God and scripture, to plan ministry, or to encourage one another in areas of spiritual growth. Covenant groups, or accountability groups, are particularly powerful ways in which a Christians can conference together and grow in faith while supporting others in their spiritual journeys.

The Daily Examen

The spiritual discipline that has perhaps meant the most to me is the practice of daily examen, which is a daily examination of my life with God. Christians from all over the world have used forms of examen for centuries. My practice is very simple. I set aside a daily time with God. As I begin my time, I take out a notebook and answer a few questions about the day. Here is what I currently ask myself:

1. When was I closest to Christ today?
2. How was I called to live out my discipleship today?
3. When was I not faithful to God, others, or myself today?
4. What good did I do today?
5. What are three things for which I am especially grateful from this day?⁴

¹ wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-16-the-means-of-grace/

² Yrigoyen, Jr. Charles. *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life*. New York: General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, 1996. p. 28.

³ Yrigoyen, p. 29-37.

⁴ My practice of daily examen originated from questions associated with the Reunion Groups of the spiritual retreat known as the Walk to Emmaus, sponsored by The Upper Room. You can learn more about the Walk to Emmaus at <https://emmaus.upperroom.org>. Additional questions for personal examen may be found in the following: Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsityPress, 2015. Pp. 59 ff; and The Upper Room Dictionary of Christian Spiritual Formation. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003. Pp. 91 ff.

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The answers do not need to be long. The purpose of this practice is to nurture my relationship with Christ and grow in my discipleship. I vary my spiritual disciplines a little every year so they stay fresh and interesting while they challenge me to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in my journey of sanctification.

My desperate need for God following my mother's accident and subsequent death deepened my faith and led

me to practices that have enriched my life. I believe we cannot navigate our way through confusing and downright frightening times successfully without a deep relationship with God. Perhaps we do not realize how soul-hungry we are until we find ourselves truly having to lean on God.

Marsha Engle Middleton

United Methodist Identity Points:

- Acts of piety are spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, studying scripture, and fasting, that allow us to grow in our relationship with God. The Holy Spirit uses activities like these in our journey toward sanctification.
- Spiritual disciplines are means of grace that strengthen our relationship with God and lead us into a life of following Jesus Christ.
- The daily examen is one spiritual discipline through which Christians can strengthen their relationship with God.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- Have you ever been desperate for God's presence, perhaps due to a crisis in your life? How did you let God know about your need?
- How might God be calling you to move toward acts of piety such as prayer, studying scripture, and a Wesleyan covenant group? Which one of these might you begin practicing first? What would be your first step in getting started?
- How can God work through a group of people who are all practicing spiritual disciplines together?