

## Introduction to the material – welcome!

This course has been designed to allow us as a church to journey together in discipleship and to discover or refresh our understanding of our gifts and callings. The material has been put together with the intention of being easy to use; being equally valuable to people of all temperaments, level of education and spiritual experience; and most of all, of being *relevant* to the places where the rubber hits the road.

Apart from the gift analysis tools, there should be very little or no advance work required before each session. Of course it always pays to have read the passage in advance if you can manage it!

The material falls into three sections. The first one deals with some of the essential exercises for deepening our walk with God. The second section invites us to take time to discover or rediscover our gifts and where we are being called to use them. The final part aims to take what we have been learning so far and apply it very specifically to the situations in which we live and work.

We're embedding the whole course in the book of Ephesians, so from time to time a session is given over to examining a particular passage from this book and praying into the challenges or issues it raises. Again, the aim is not to grow *students* (although the study of scripture is admirable, and to be encouraged) but *disciples*. The book of Ephesians is a tremendously exciting exploration of our spiritual blessings and our call to be a renewed people in our ethics and relationships – a people who live out the reality of who they have become – children of God.

The keys to a successful year are our commitment to our groups, our willingness to be honest and vulnerable, and our observance of confidentiality. Most of all, if God is on the move, we will find ourselves caught up in the dance – let's pray that we all catch the rhythm of his music this year.

Finally, a few words from Richard Foster. In his excellent book ***A Celebration of Discipline*** (recommended reading for us all this year), he writes the following (slightly paraphrased):

“Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deeper people.

The classical exercises of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths. They invite us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm. They urge us to be the answer to a hollow world.

We must not be led to believe that these exercises are only for spiritual giants and hence beyond our reach, or only for contemplatives who devote all their time to prayer and meditation. Far from it. God intends them to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, they are best practiced in the midst of relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbours.

Neither should we think of them as some dull drudgery aimed at exterminating laughter from the face of the earth. Joy is the keynote of all the exercises of discipleship. Their purpose is liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear. When the inner spirit is liberated from all that weighs it down, it can hardly be described as dull drudgery. Singing, dancing, even shouting characterise the exercises of the spiritual life.”

## Session 1. What's the point of it all?

Read Ephesians 2:1-10 in several different versions<sup>1</sup>

### **For discussion:**

This passage describes a *before* and an *after*.

Examine the characteristics of each.

How does the passage tell us the transformation is brought about?

Some people make the journey suddenly; some make it gradually. Where are you on the journey?

How will the truths in this passage influence your time with God this week?

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<sup>1</sup> A large number of different Bible versions can be found on line (and exported) at [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)

## Session 2. The exercise of: prayer

Spend some time reading through some of the famous prayers in the Bible:

- Genesis 18:16-33
- Daniel 9:1-19
- Luke 22:39-46

“Real prayer is something we learn. The disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” They had prayed all their lives and yet something about the quality and quantity of Jesus’ praying caused them to see how little they knew about prayer. If their praying was make any difference on the human scene, there were some things they needed to learn.

It was liberating to me to discover that prayer involved a learning process. I was set free to question, to experiment, even to fail, for I knew I was learning. For years I had prayed for many things and with great intensity, but with only marginal success. But then I saw that I might possibly be doing some things wrong and could learn differently.

A misconception is that our faith will crumble if our prayers are not answered the first time, every time. It is this fear that causes us to gravitate towards vague prayers – then if nothing happens, no-one is any the wiser. But suppose I walk into my office and turn on the light switch and nothing happens. Would I say, “Well, I never believed in electricity anyway!” No, I would assume something is wrong, and I would set out to find out what it is: perhaps the bulb is burned out or the connection is faulty. The same is true with prayer, and very often I have found out the problem is indeed a faulty connection at our end.”

Richard Foster, A Celebration of Discipline

### For discussion:

What has prayer been like for you in your journey with God? How is it at the moment?

In your life, which area of prayer would most benefit from an MOT? Some suggestions: praying with faith; being disciplined; listening to God; persistence; the feeling of God’s presence...

What are your biggest hindrances to a fuller prayer life?

Do you need to take action this week? What might that look like?

## Session 3. Knowing him better

Read Ephesians 1:15-23 in several versions.

Pull out a list of what Paul prays that for Ephesian church to know. How does such knowledge come about?

### **For discussion:**

Look at the following list of words. Which ones describe your knowledge of God's love?

meaningful

deep

intellectual

fresh

growing

personal

clinical

cold

informed

intimate

irrelevant

educated

What might it mean to *know* God's love in the everyday?

What do *you* need to do to know God's love more meaningfully? Are there any steps you need to take today?

## Session 4. The exercise of: meditation<sup>2</sup>

Read Psalm 1:1-3 in several translations, and then the following:

“My suggestion is that you take a single event, or a parable, or a few verses, or even a single word, and allow it to take root in you. Seek to live the experience.

Suppose we want to meditate on Jesus’ staggering statement, ‘My peace I give to you’ (John 14:27). Our task is not so much to study the passage as it is to be initiated into the reality of which the passage speaks. We brood on the truth that he is now filling us with his peace... Rather than dissecting peace, we are entering into it... No longer do we laboriously think of ways to act peacefully, for acts of peace spring spontaneously from within. Remember that we enter the story, not as passive observers, but as active participants. Also remember that Christ is truly with us to teach us, to heal us, to forgive us.”

### **A suggested meditation to try as a group:**

One person reads John 6:1-13, and then the following. Read slowly, with frequent pauses. The whole exercise might take 15 minutes.

Begin by imagining yourself the child who gave his lunch, or perhaps his parents... try to place yourself at the actual scene. Attempt to use all your senses. Try to *see* the story. What do you see - the grass, the hill, the faces of the people? Try to *hear* the story. What do you hear - the sound of the water, the noise of the children, the voice of the Master? Try to *feel* the story. What do you feel - the texture of your clothing, the hardness of the ground, the coarseness of your hands? Finally, try to feel with your emotions. What do you feel - hesitancy at bringing your lunch, astonishment at the miracle, joy at the gracious provision of God?

Now in your imagination, watch the crowd leave and Jesus go up into the hills. You are left alone. You sit on a rock overlooking the water re-experiencing the events of the day. You become quiet, and after a little while, Jesus returns and sits on a nearby rock. For a time you are both silent, looking out over the water, perhaps, and enjoying one another’s presence. After a while, the Lord turns to you and asks this question, ‘What may I do for you?’ Tell him what is in your heart - your needs, your fears, your hopes.

When you have finished, you become quiet for a little while. Then you turn to the Lord and ask, ‘What may I do for you?’ And then you listen with the heart, quietly, prayerfully. No instruction needs to come, for you are glad to be in the Lord’s presence. But if some word does come to you, take it with the utmost seriousness.

(Allow time for people to ‘return’ slowly.)

### **For discussion:**

What is most threatening to you about Christian meditation?

Is anything cluttering your life and making it hard for you to experience the voice of God? What changes might you make?

How might this exercise serve the way you approach God this week?

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<sup>2</sup> Material adapted from Richard Foster, ‘A Celebration of Discipline.’

## Session 5: The exercise of: study<sup>3</sup>

Read Romans 12:1-2, and Philippians 4:8.

“The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total transformation of the person. They aim at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the Discipline of study. We are transformed by the renewing of our mind.

Many Christians remains in bondage to fears and anxieties simply because they so not avail themselves of the Discipline of study. They may be faithful in church attendance and earnest in fulfilling their religious duties, and still they are not changed. Why? Because they have never taken up one of the central ways God uses to change us: study. Jesus made it unmistakably clear that the knowledge of the truth will make you free. (John 8:32) Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us. Getting high on Jesus will not free us. Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free.”

Foster describes four steps to study:

1. Repetition – channelling the mind in a specific direction, ingraining channels of thought.
2. Concentration – bringing the mind repeatedly to the subject matter; focussing the attention on what is being studied.
3. Comprehension – the ‘eureka’ moment.
4. Reflection – thinking about the significance of what we are studying

“All of us know persons who have taken some course of study or attained some academic degree who parade their information in an offensive manner. We should feel sorry for them. They do not understand the Discipline of study. They mistake the spouting of words for wisdom. How tragic!”

### **For discussion:**

What resources might you choose to study, in addition to the Bible? (Some suggestions – Christian books, newspapers, nature, literature, film...)

What would characterise *Godly study* of a secular piece of material such as a film?

Is this exercise just for the intellectually elite?

Can you agree together to study one thing before the next meeting? Are there practical, attitudinal or spiritual hurdles to overcome in order to do this?

### **Planning for next time...**

Appoint one or two people to bring in a piece of music which stirs their hearts to worship God.

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<sup>3</sup> Material adapted from Richard Foster, ‘A Celebration of Discipline.’

## **Session 6: Give me strength to understand!**

Read Ephesians 3:14-21 in several different translations.

Listen to the music that has been brought in<sup>4</sup>. Consider moving into prayer and worship as you feel led.

### **For discussion :**

How has the practice of the spiritual exercises been going in the last few weeks? Any stories of encouragement? Any struggles?

How has the 'love that surpasses knowledge' been revealed in and through your life recently? How might this be enriched?

"I pray that out of his glorious riches he might strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." What could this look like in your life this week? What are the places where this will be challenged? How do you need prayer for this?

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<sup>4</sup> See note for previous session

## Session 7: The exercise of: fasting<sup>5</sup>

“It is sobering to realise that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive (Matt6:16-18). To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion. How easy it is to take something like fasting and try to use it to get God to do what we want. At times there is such stress upon the blessings and benefits of fasting that we would be tempted to believe that with a little fast we could have the world, including God, eating out of our hands.

Fasting must forever centre on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained. Like the prophetess Anna, we must be ‘worshipping with fasting’ (Luke 2:37). Every other purpose must be subservient to God...

God questioned the people in Zechariah’s day, ‘When you fasted... was it really for me that you fasted?’ (Zech 7:5). If our fasting is not for God, we have failed. Physical benefits, success in prayer, the enduring with power, spiritual insights – these must never replace God as the centre of our fasting.

Fasting:

1. Reveals the things that control us
2. Reminds us that we are sustained ‘by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’
3. Helps us to keep our balance in life
4. Concentrates our minds and hearts on lining up once again in the will of God”

There are many more, very helpful, reflections on fasting (along with eleven other spiritual disciplines) in Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*. If you buy a copy, you won’t regret it!!

Read Acts 13v1-3; Acts 14v19-23.

### **For discussion:**

To what extent should we regard the early church’s habit of fasting to be normative (setting the ‘normal’ standard) for us?

What is your attitude towards fasting? How much is it informed by the Bible, and how much by societal attitudes to food and our bodies?

Does anyone in the group have any experience they can share in this area?

How might fasting help you in your walk with God? Are there areas of spiritual deadlock which fasting might help to break (*‘This kind can only come out by prayer and fasting’* Mark 9:29)?

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<sup>5</sup> Material adapted from Richard Foster, ‘A Celebration of Discipline.’