


SMALL GROUP GUIDE



**HOLY
HABITS**

**HABITS THAT HELP US HUNGER
FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS**

CIRCLE 01/04: **SABBATH**

Our habits are powerful. We form our habits, then our habits transform us. I'm sure you've seen that the quality of our lives directly rises and falls on the habits we develop — both big and small. This is why the Apostle Paul says, "whatever a man sows, that will he also reap" (Galatians 6:7).

Whenever the Bible deploys a farming metaphor, it's because the author wants to ensure the audience gets it. They understood agriculture. Their culture revolved around planting and harvesting seasons. Their quality of life was the direct result of their labor during the sowing season. If they wanted bread in December, they needed to plant wheat in March. If they wanted fresh olive oil, they needed to plant olive trees five years earlier. In our lives, like with farming, outcomes are gradual instead of immediate. Your success is the sum of your habits.

When you commit to consistent exercise, you see results over time. When you consistently journal, you will begin to crave it. When you consistently take breaks from your phone, you will see your stress levels decrease. When you consistently read scripture, pray, and meditate, you will experience renewed spiritual growth. Daily routines lead to long-term development. In this study, we are going to examine and evaluate some Holy Habits. Just like healthy habits are good for our bodies, holy habits are good for our minds, emotions, and soul. Take a look at how Jesus attached these practices to a promise.

READ: Matthew 5:6

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

When Jesus kicked off his ministry in Judea, He started with a powerful sermon on a mountainside, called the Sermon on the Mount. His voice echoed through the valley while he taught eager listeners about God's kingdom, the Ten Commandments, and hunger. He wasn't talking about hunger for bread and fish. That's a different sermon near a different mountain. In this sermon, Jesus is talking about spiritual hunger. He opened His message, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

The Greek word for "blessed" is "*makarioi*." It literally translates as "to make happy." Jesus is saying, "Happy are those that hunger and thirst for righteousness." I believe that Jesus intentionally used the language of hunger and thirst in this passage. Can you think of anything more habitual than eating and hydrating? It's one of the few

things that every human does every day. He is saying that we should crave the pursuit of God like we crave food and water.

Jesus uses this language because he wants you to habitually seek righteousness the same way you do water after a long run. You must make your spiritual health a habit. So what does it look like to routinely seek righteousness?

That's where Holy Habits come into play. You seek righteousness by committing to spiritual practices that recharge your soul. Over the next four sessions, we will discuss the habits of Bible study, meditation, fasting, and rest. Each of these is designed to strengthen your spiritual life and personal health. Let's start with one of the most overlooked of all spiritual disciplines — Sabbath rest.

Why is it overlooked? It's not active; it's passive. Sabbath derives from the Hebrew word Shabbat which means "day of rest." Interestingly, this is where we get our English word for Saturday because Jewish believers reserve Saturday as their official day of rest. It's not about a date circled on the calendar though, it's about the state of your heart.

Where do we get this idea of taking an entire day to rest? The principle is found within the Ten Commandments, the initial Law delivered by God to Israel. Moses presented two tablets with ten laws to His people in the book of Exodus.

READ: Exodus 20:8-11

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath Day of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work; you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servants, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day

When God delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses, He only used four words to condemn theft and five words to denounce adultery. Then, God used over eighty words to explain the importance of rest. That should show us the sheer significance God placed upon the Sabbath. Since He designed people, He knew what they needed to thrive. We all need the Holy Habit of Sabbath.

I can sense you scratching your head remarking, "so, our first Holy Habit is the habit of doing nothing?" If it were only that simple. In the modern era, doing nothing is near

impossible. Our schedules are packed. Expectations are high. Distractions are unavoidable. God invites you to adopt an alternative mindset. He's imploring, "stop doing so much! Take some time to rest."

Taking an intentional break is not lazy; it's holy.

What makes it holy? Intentionality. A Sabbath without intentionality is just a lazy day. However, when we invite God into this practice, we are transformed. John Mark Comer, in his brilliant book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, suggested that the purpose of Sabbath pushes "your heart toward grateful recognition of God's reality and goodness." Sabbaths are not just about the rest, it's about the recognition of God. When we slow down, we see God's goodness all around us.

So, what should you do? Nothing. Seriously. Just reserve a day to slow down, clear out your calendar, rest, and experience God. Biblical rest isn't just sitting down in a dark room listening to worship music. Find something that fills and fuels you for your Sabbath. When we take a Sabbath-day walk, we see God's majesty. When we turn off our phones once a week, we are far more likely to encounter God in our quiet time. When we rest, God rejuvenates and resets us. That's the strength of the Sabbath.

There is tension though. Our culture looks down on the slow pace God expects of His people. Dr. Walter Bruggeman explains, "in our culture, Sabbath is resistance." Looking at society's collective schedule, it's a rebellious act to rest. So how do we do it? Here are three simple steps towards incorporating the Holy Habit of Sabbath into your life.

Take a Small Sabbath Once a Day

Think small. Start with just one hour. I get it. God didn't say, "Remember a Sabbath hour and keep it holy," but observing a Sabbath hour is in line with His intention for rest.

Personally, I have found attaching spiritual intentionality to my self-care has revolutionized the way I connect with God and unwind after a demanding day. Every night, I leave my phone in another room, put on some music, do some skincare, drink some tea, and read God's word.

Strangely enough, true intentional rest requires a lot of work. There are days I have to force myself to do it. Even if my task list is loaded or an unwatched television show sits in my queue, my soul craves my sabbath hour. If I miss it, I am miserable. Why?

Because Sabbath is good for you. Just like your muscles require recovery after a workout, your soul requires recovery after a stressful day.

Take a Technology Sabbath

Our constant connectivity has made Sabbath strikingly difficult. Not to step on any toes, but our phones are getting in the way of healthy habits. May I suggest you take a rest from tech as well?

Turn off your device for a set amount of time daily or weekly. Let's be honest, it's embarrassingly difficult and surprisingly rewarding. When I first started intentionally taking tech rests, I had to wrestle with a difficult truth. I realized that I was addicted to my phone. It proves an addiction to both connection and productivity, but it goes further than that. Our devices ensure our brains never go unstimulated. We use them for distraction, escape, and entertainment.

Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline* asks, "How do you discern an addiction? Very simply, you watch for undisciplined compulsions." I might never have discerned my undisciplined compulsion to "just check" my phone every few seconds without intentionally fasting from technology. I'd implore you to do the same. While hard at first, you'll be happy you did.

Take a Sabbath Day Seriously

Think back to the first work week of world history. The first two chapters of Genesis describe God creating the universe in six days and resting on the seventh. He formed the cosmos, then molded the earth, then filled the oceans with water, then filled the same water with fish, then sculpted the first humans from a few atoms of dust, and then God took a well-deserved day off. Yes, even God took a break. What do you think that means for you? Mirror His model.

We must take Sabbath seriously because God does. He doesn't just expect it. He commands it. Put it on your schedule. Block off the whole day. Let people know you'll be hard to reach on your Sabbath day.

We've said it dozens of times, but it bears repeating. True rest requires intentionality. Have you noticed that most people push off their chores and expectations to the weekend? That's the opposite of God's objective for you. Ask yourself what you can accomplish today to give you better rest over the weekend. Clean your room on Thursday night. Do the dishes on Friday morning. Finish your assignments early. You'll

be doing your future self a big favor. Your intentionality in the little things is a big investment in your overall spiritual health.

God wants you to be fulfilled and filled, not exhausted and empty. Not only will regular rest rejuvenate your life, but it'll also refresh your entire routine. It won't ruin your productivity either. The Holy Habit of Sabbath helps you operate at your fullest potential. It seems ironic, but when you commit to consistent rhythms of rest, you will become less busy and more productive. It's true. When you intentionally honor the Sabbath, you are setting yourself up for more success and less stress. Thankfully, it's all for your benefit. God will do greater things through you in six days than you can do with seven on your own.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Introduce yourself and share this week's highs and lows (the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week).

Q2: What is one thing that stuck out to you from this message?

Q3: What is one habit you've developed that has had a positive impact on your life?

Q4: Why do you think Sabbath and rest are so overlooked?

Q5: What can you do to be more intentional about Sabbath?

Application: Start your Sabbath routine. Whether it's for a whole day, one hour, or from technology. Start taking intentional time to rest your body and rejuvenate your soul this week.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Deuteronomy 8:18

Philippians 4:13

Proverbs 10:4

Romans 8:28

Colossians 3:23

Joshua 1:9

Proverbs 3:5-6

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 02/04: BIBLE STUDY

We are blessed to live in a world with bread. Whether we are talking about chewy bagels in New York City, buttery garlic knots from the local Italian place, Bao from a little cart in Shanghai, or Naan served with Indian curry, bread is a staple at tables all around the world. It's also an important metaphor in the Bible.

Shortly after his 30th birthday, Jesus was just about to kick off His public ministry. He didn't start with business cards or a billboard. Instead, He planned a little retreat and vision quest. Jesus ventured into the wilderness to pray, fast, and unplug. We aren't talking about a wilderness resort with a pool and spa. Jesus was roughing it in the middle of the desert. He was weak from fasting and exhausted from the harsh elements, so the enemy saw an opportunity. At His weakest, the Devil appeared to tempt Jesus with the sins of pride, idolatry, and...bread making.

Yes, you heard that right. That's exactly what happened. Satan, the accuser, tempted Jesus to bake up a loaf of bread in the middle of the desert. Let's examine this passage to learn how we can overcome conflict, temptation, and accusation.

READ: Luke 4:1-4

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

We often assume that Jesus' temptation in the wilderness contained a few short episodes over a forty-day period. That's not what this passage teaches. Luke records that Satan tempted Jesus for forty days straight. It was a nonstop battle. Satan stalked Jesus through the sandy landscape while whispering in His ear every step of the way. What was the first temptation? The devil told Jesus to make bread out of some stones.

For context, Jesus was fasting. A chunk of bread isn't evil, but this would break the commitment made by Christ. The devil wanted to stop His spiritual journey with a physical temptation. This is how the enemy often works. He uses physical temptation to distract us from spiritual growth.

Motioning to some loaf-shaped boulders, Lucifer likely prodded, "You're hungry, aren't you? Turn these stones into a snack. You have the power, don't you? Wouldn't a hot

piece of buttered toast be delicious right now?" Jesus rebutted, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He quoted the Old Testament. This exact line comes from the book of Deuteronomy. When Christ was in conflict, Scripture was his escape. The Word of God is our source of spiritual food and fuel. Scripture is soul food.

The Bible is bread.

Just like food is essential for your physical health, the Bible is essential for your spiritual health. Do you want a full and fulfilled life? Nourish your soul with scripture. It's not a luxury. It's a necessity. Notice that Jesus said we are to "live by" every Word that comes from God. He didn't merely say to read it or get it tattooed on our arms. Jesus commanded us to live by the word of God. Without food, you become physically weak. Without God's word, you become spiritually weak.

Bread has gotten a bad wrap over the years. Low carb diets spread a smear campaign that actually made bread sales plummet. Health-conscious folks will do jumping jacks at the sheer smell of fresh bread. That's not the kind of bread Jesus was tempted with, though. Bread in this era was nutritionally dense. It wasn't like the Wonder Bread at your local supermarket. This stuff was full of sprouted grains, seeds, fiber, protein, and the nutrients people needed to get through a day of manual labor. It was a superfood.

The Bible is for nourishment, not indulgence. I once saw an Instagram post that read, "The Bible is bread for daily nourishment, not cake for special occasions." I love that thought. You shouldn't only crack open your Bible during church services. God gave it to you for daily use. Meditating on scripture is like medicine. God's Word, like food, is designed to give you energy, vigor, and health. Form the habit of spiritual health by reading the Bible every day.

In this passage, Jesus didn't just use God's Word for energy. He also used it as a weapon against the enemy's attacks. A baguette would make a terrible sword, which is why the Bible also teaches us another central role of Scripture in our lives.

The Bible is a blade.

God's word is a weapon for when the enemy attacks. In Ephesians 6, Paul urges us to take on the full armor of God which includes "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). Jesus was attacked in the wilderness, so He used the word

as a weapon. The Bible doesn't just help us get healthier, it also makes us a better fighter.

Read scripture every day, it is the weapon that helps you win every battle. Whenever you encounter a lie from the enemy, respond to it with the truth of God. Whenever you are feeling fear, go into the Word for peace. Whenever you face an attack, open the Bible for strength. You likely don't see too many needs for a sword while living in the suburbs. What are we fighting against, anyway? Paul, in the same passage, teaches that "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the power of the dark world."

Every day, we find ourselves fighting a spiritual war. We are defending ourselves from the lies of the enemy and his tempting tactics. Daily scripture reading helps us replace the lies in our mind with the truth of God. If you want to win the fight, you need the right weapon. Reach for God's word.

The Bible is like bread; it nourishes us. The Bible is like a blade; it protects us. Lastly, the Bible is like a band-aid; it heals us.

The Bible is a bandaid.

Emotional injury is impossible to avoid. The lies of the enemy may even make a home in your heart. Next thing you know, you have allowed a lie to swallow us up. It's possible that what someone did or said cut us deeper than people know. We can replay the awful things someone said to us in our head like a playlist on repeat. Next thing you know, injury has become your identity. When you are emotionally hurt, you need spiritual healing.

The authors of the Bible are well acquainted with pain. They wrote about hurt, suffering, grief, snake bites, rashes, and the consequences of their sin. One of the most prolific writers about pain is King David, the primary song-writer behind most of the Psalms. He was the Taylor Swift of Ancient Israel — writing relatable songs about heartbreak, pain, loss, and loneliness.

In Psalm 107, David writes, "He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave" (Psalm 107:20). This song was written to the Jewish Diaspora, which is a fancy word for "the scattered." The Jewish people were forced to live in exile, away from their homes, friends, and families. They lived a life on the move, which led to some complex emotional turmoil. They were feeling lost, directionless, and

insignificant. David wrote a song to help them find application within their affliction. To sum up the Psalm, healing is found in the Word of God.

If you are facing insecurity or inadequacy, read God's healing Word. You will discover a life-changing truth that there is a real God who really loves you and really wants the best for your life. Maybe You can't stop thinking about the cutting words he said to you before slamming the door behind him. Commit to meditating on the Word of our God who calls you perfectly and wonderfully made. Maybe your brain flashbacks and reminds you of the trauma you faced. The word of God will show you that God can heal and redeem even your deepest hurts.

I know it doesn't feel like it, but emotional healing is possible for you. Healing is available to you because God is active within you. The message that David wrote to the scattered Israelites is still true today — God's Word heals wounds. It's like a bandaid for your soul.

Like Satan stalking Jesus in the wilderness, the enemy uses the same strategy when going after you. He waits for you to be weak, then he tempts you like he did to Jesus. After that, he condemns you for the temptation. It's a vicious spiral that leads to emptiness, brokenness, and hurt. Fortunately, God has given us what we need to stop the cycle. God's word gives us nourishment, protection, and healing.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Introduce yourself and share this week's highs and lows (the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week).

Q2: What can we do to develop the Holy Habit of reading God's word every day?

Q3: Have you ever heard a Bible verse that helped you through a difficult moment? Share the verse and/or situation, if you can remember.

Q4: What do you need most from God's Word right now? Nourishment and strength; protection from lies and temptation; or healing from hurts and hardships?

Q5: What can you commit to doing this week to begin integrating Bible reading into your routine?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Matthew 17:20

Isaiah 40:31

Galatians 6:1-5

Proverbs 16

Psalms 131

Ephesians 4:2

2 Chronicles 7:14

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 03/04: **MEDITATION**

Morning people confuse me. There are some people who spring out of bed, swing open their curtains, and celebrate the morning with pep in their step. Then there are people like me, normal people. I hit snooze a few times, limp around like a zombie, and moan until I get my first cup of coffee. Don't get me wrong. I love mornings, but that's because morning time is when I usually get my best sleep.

One day, I woke up insanely early for flight, so I decided to pick up my coffee on the way to the airport. In a hurry, I pulled into a famous fast food restaurant's drive through. "I will have a large McCoffee," I mumbled into the speaker box. "Pull around to the first window," replied a distorted voice with a southern accent. Upon arriving at the window, they asked me to pull forward while they brewed some fresh coffee. "Fantastic, it will be nice and hot," I thought to myself as I parked in their holding area.

Two and a half minutes passed -- no coffee. Five minutes passed -- I began getting impatient. Ten minutes passed -- I had already seen a few dozen cars drive by with coffee in their hands. Finally, after twelve minutes of torture, I abandoned my car and walked into the dining room to investigate. It turns out they forgot about me. My rude response makes me cringe. I snatched the cup of coffee, complained, and slammed the door behind me. Well, I tried to slam it. Their hydraulic doors close slowly, so I looked more silly than angry.

Our world is obsessed with fast, isn't it? I found myself frustrated because my order didn't appear instantly. We love fast food, fast cars, fast money, and instant gratification. Since our world wears busyness like a badge of honor, it's countercultural to slow down. There is power in pausing. We must learn to swim against the cultural current by slowing down. How do we experience slow moments in a culture that demands hustle? By embracing the spiritual discipline of meditation. Meditation helps us hear God's voice despite the noise, slow down when life is speeding by, and connect with God despite all the commotion. When our culture demands hustle, God suggests stillness.

READ: Psalm 46:10-11

"Be still, and know that I am God. The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

Psalm 46 is one of the best known "songs of Zion." These were Psalms written for worship services during pivotal moments in the nation's history. Choirs and crowds

would sing these words during both victories and defeats. Each stanza serves as a reminder that God is the ultimate source of strength and safety. That's not just true for ancient Israel. We've even seen this Psalm spoken as a source for comfort in modern America. President Obama famously recited this passage on the tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks while standing before a monument commemorating thousands of lost lives.

This verse isn't a call to take a holy nap. It's a challenge to connect to God's presence in the quiet. David mentions that God is with us four times in this song (verses 1, 5, 7, and 11). God's abounding presence serves as a source of peace in times of panic. This passage is particularly powerful when life is perplexing. These words serve as the perfect map for personal meditation. The Psalmist is urging his readers to slow down and pay attention, because God is here.

Pause. God is present.

The problem is obvious and the solution is simple. Take some time to slow down. Meditation allows us to calm our hearts, slow down our thoughts, and connect with God. Take a break. Find a quiet place. Turn off the notifications. And be still before God. Your body needs movement, but your soul needs stillness. Meditation happens when we take intentional time to press pause on our thoughts and listen to whatever God has for us in the present moment.

Let's make this principle practical. Here are three ways that you can meditate.

God's Word Meditation

Since meditation is all about hearing from God, it's smart to start with His Words. The most important type of meditation is scripture meditation. This is when you approach the Bible mindfully -- looking for transformation instead of just information. Always open scripture meditation with a prayer that asks God to illuminate the words to you. Unlike biology, you do not have to study this alone. The Holy Spirit will guide you. Below, you will find the SOAP method of Biblical meditation. (I did not make up the acronym.)

S - This stands for "Scripture." Spend a lot of time reading the text. Actually read it over and over again. You could consider writing it out or speaking it aloud. Invite all your senses to this experience. Circle words that stick out to you. Say powerful phrases. Doodle in the margin to illustrate the message. Underline, highlight, and

markup to your heart's content. You will be amazed by what God will show you when you simply slow down and read attentively.

O- The O stands for "Observation." What immediately sticks out to you? What do you think this meant to the ancient audience? Are there any clear repetitions? Does there seem to be an argument or thesis statement? Write all of this down. Do not quickly start by exploring what it means to you — explore what the text means in context.

A - This stands for "Application." We need to look at scripture with first-century eyes and a 21st-century application. This is when meditation moves into meaning. Explore the practical application of this passage for your present situation. How can you apply this passage to your life? What does this mean to you and what you're going through? Does this nudge you towards some change? Let the word speak to you, encourage you, and transform you.

P - The P stands for "Prayer." Pray for God to reveal things you've missed in your study. Pray for truth to take root in your heart. You can even directly pray the words of scripture. (Especially if you're in the Psalms, as that's their design.) Confess any sin or shortcomings this scripture exposed. Pray for God to make you more like Him. This is when many spiritual disciplines all work together in harmony.

Grounding Meditation

Meditation is powerful because it invites us to focus solely on the present moment. We detach from the pain of the past and the worries about the future in order to just enjoy God's presence in the present. In counseling textbooks, this process is called "grounding." This discipline allows us to stabilize our stress reactions by intentionally connecting with the present moment. It brings us out of our heads and into our current surroundings.

Here are three suggestions for grounding meditation:

Breathe in, slowly counting to 4. Hold for 4, and release slowly, counting to 8. Repeat until calm, then meet God in prayer.

Turn on your favorite worship music, loudly or in headphones, and really focus on the music. Close your eyes, resonate with the words, and worship intentionally wherever you are.

Use a pen or pencil and write down a word like J-E-S-U-S, P-E-A-C-E, or H-O-P-E. Then keep tracing it over-and-over while praying with each movement.

Make a list of five things you are thankful for -- think small and specific. Read the list aloud and thank God for every single one until you feel yourself at peace.

Guided Meditation

Guided Meditation is all about inviting God to invade ordinary routines and spaces with His extraordinary presence. God's voice is not necessarily audible like something you'd hear on the radio. He often communicates with us using small sensations, comforting thoughts, and a supernatural sense of peace.

Here is a guided meditation that I use while making my cup of coffee in the morning.

- While grinding the beans, reflect on any place I feel broken in my life.
- While holding the cup, focus on the rising steam. Reflect on the glory of God that led the Israelites through the wilderness. Then reflect on how God has been guiding me.
- While taking your first sip, notice the taste and the aroma. Thank God for giving you your senses. Begin to notice and sense the sensations around you -- smell, taste, sight, even temperature and sunlight.
- While enjoying your cup of coffee, feel the warm liquid travel down your throat. Thank God for all the good things in life.
- Be still. And just be still and focus on God's presence.

Here are three principles to guide us in the discipline of meditation.

Meditation puts you on the path to inner peace. Peace arrives in the presence of God. Thus, you need to strive to encounter His peace-giving presence throughout our day. We can do this through prayer, God's word, and meditation. Meditation is not reserved for monks perched atop of misty mountainside. You can meditate in your car, while sitting on your bedside, or while making your morning coffee. You can do this anywhere because God is everywhere. Peace is found within the person of Jesus. Meditation helps you grow closer to Him.

Focusing on the present dramatically changes your perspective. It's exhausting to constantly think about what happened in the past or what is happening in the future. Meditation allows you to plug into the present moment with God. Psalm 16 expounds, "In the presence of God there is fullness of joy." There is a reason it's called God's presence, because it's a gift that's unfolding right now.

Christian meditation seeks to fill you, not empty you. Most people think of the monkey from Lion King when they imagine meditation. We imagine cross-legged gurus surrounded by smoking incense while humming, "Ommmmmm." Sure, that's a version of meditation, but it's not what we're talking about. Eastern traditions are focused on simply emptying your mind. Whereas, in Christian meditation, we seek to empty ourselves in order to fill our hearts and minds with God's truth.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Introduce yourself and share this week's highs and lows (the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week).

Q2: What does it mean to meditate as a Christian? Why is meditation a spiritual discipline?

Q3: Do you find it difficult to sit in quiet stillness? Why or why not?

Q4: Which meditation style most interests you: Scripture meditation, grounding meditation, or guided meditation? Why?

Q5: Do you have any questions about Christian meditation?

Q6: What can you commit to doing this week to begin integrating meditation into your routine?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

1 John 5:14-16

Luke 1:46-55

Hebrews 4:14-16

Luke 18:1-8

Luke 18:9-14

John 15:1-11

Luke 22:39-44

Psalm 46

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 04/04: **FASTING**

We live in a fast food culture. Everyone is always on the go. We move through life at the speed of light. While this culture is accepted, it's also dangerous. It negatively affects our relationships, mental health, and emotional health. Furthermore, our "grab and go" values deteriorate the way we eat. If you are honest with yourself, your food choices probably aren't always the healthiest.

We don't just suffer from bad eating decisions; we can also suffer from bad eating intentions. Other parts of the world eat because they're hungry, but in America, we eat when we feel tired, stressed, anxious, bored, or sad. Unfortunately, our eating too often isn't about hunger at all. You've seen the results. You may feel sluggish and slow. You may feel lethargic and bloated. You may feel useless without caffeine or a sugar rush.

Let's end the cycle and rebel against our McCulture. As we close our study on Holy Habits, I would like to invite you to commit to a life-changing experience that will deeply impact your body, soul, and mind. It may be the hardest habit on our list, but it's also particularly powerful. Let's examine a spiritual discipline called fasting.

Simply put, **fasting is refraining from something physical to gain something spiritual.** In many cases, fasting is refraining from physical food for a spiritual purpose. However, it is so much bigger than just burgers and fries. Theologian Richard Foster put it this way: "Fasting is the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of an intense spiritual activity. There is nothing wrong with normal life functions, but there are times when we must set them aside to concentrate. Fasting helps us see what controls us."

Believe it or not, there is a direct link between your stomach and your spirit. Throughout the Bible, we see that refraining from food for a period of time can bring you into a richer, deeper, more powerful relationship with God. Jesus mirrored this while also encouraging us to live out the same lifestyle.

READ: Matthew 6:16

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Fasting is an expectation.

We often assume that fasting is reserved for the super-spiritual. We imagine seekers in a remote monastery exchanging dialogue with a voice from heaven. Maybe that's true for

some people, but it's certainly not for most. Fasting is not some exclusive right of passage for the devout; rather, it's a way of life for all disciples. You included.

In Matthew 16, Jesus kicks off his teaching with a simple phrase. He begins, "When you fast..." He didn't say "If you fast..." Rather, He said, "WHEN you fast." According to Jesus, fasting is an expectation. It's a central part of our Christian lifestyle. It's just something that Christians do, not something He has to convince them to do.

Why does God want us to fast? Because it opens us up to what He has for us. When we push aside distractions, God meets us in our weakness and our hunger. Yes, it is difficult to put aside food for any period of time. I don't know about you, but I get grumpy after a skipped lunch. It requires devotion and discipline. However, there is a promise within this passage. Jesus concludes, "... your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you openly." When you fast privately, God rewards you publicly.

Here is a word of warning, though. Fasting isn't about getting something from God. Rather, it's about giving ourselves to God. Yes, there is a promise of reward. That reward may not have a bright red bow or a big price tag. Your reward may be renewed energy, peace of mind, or greater intimacy with God. Those are all greater than anything money can purchase. Fasting isn't about forcing God to move on your behalf. It's about God transforming you.

This principle is evident in the Old Testament story of Daniel who fasted in order to pursue God while making sense of all the confusion around him. He didn't need a diet, he needed direction. In Daniel 9:3, we read, "As I prayed, I fasted and wore rough sackcloth, and I sprinkled myself with ashes."

Fasting Is Not About Food, It's About Focus

In Chapter 9, Daniel was in a dilemma. He was seeing vivid visions of terror coming upon his nation. For context, this takes place as the empire is being destroyed. It was undoubtedly terrifying and confusing. Seeing all the hurt and pain led the prophet to pray. The prayer in Daniel 9 provides us with a great model for how to pray during a crisis.

When Daniel was overwhelmed, he strived to fix his focus. How did he do it? With fasting. When we fast, it allows us to focus on God. It will help you focus on him more, which will change your perspectives and outlook. When you focus on what you cannot have, you will quickly lose sight of your primary focus — growing closer to Jesus.

Jesus said some miracles could only happen through prayer and fasting, not by prayer alone (Matthew 17:21). Moses fasted before he received the Ten Commandments (1

Samuel 7:6-12). Jesus fasted before starting his public ministry (Luke 4:1-2). Clearly, fasting is a significant theme in scripture, so how do we do it?

Full Fast

In a normal fast, a person goes without any type of food for a predetermined amount of time. Of course, water is allowed and necessary. Extreme caution should be taken with long full fasts, especially if there are any underlying medical conditions.

Partial Fast

In a partial fast, a person eats certain foods in a period of time, or has one or two meals a day. Daniel ate only vegetables during his fasts. John the Baptist ate only food from the land during his fasts. During a partial fast, you focus on sacrificing a specific food for spiritual benefit. You can cut out meat, sugar, processed foods, or any combination of those.

Solid Food Fast

This is a version of the partial fast where you only drink juice -- vegetable and fruit. (Not milkshakes or sugar-packed smoothies.)

Soul Fast

Does something consume a lot of your time? Consider cutting it out. It is possible to fast from something other than food. You can decide to fast from social media, screen time, television, or even sitting. Replace any specific activity with time in prayer and worship. Soul fasts are designed to help us discover spiritual balance.

Fasting is powerful because it fixes our focus. Let your hunger trigger you to pray. Prayer is the power behind your fast — let it fuel you. Without prayer, fasting is just a fad diet. Pray with expectation as you fast. We see this theme throughout scripture. Fasting is often the precursor to breakthrough. However, the goal of your fast shouldn't be gain -- it should just be God.

Fasting is not a means of pursuing God's blessings. It's just about pursuing God.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Introduce yourself and share this week's highs and lows (the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week).

Q2: What is the point of fasting as a Christian?

Q3: What are some things that distract you from God (physically, mentally, or emotionally)?

Q4: What would it look like to fast any of those distractions? How might that help you fix your focus on God?

Q5: Do you have any questions about fasting as a Christian?

Q6: What can you commit to doing this week to begin integrating fasting (of any style, not only food fasting) into your routine?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Matthew 6:16-18

James 1:3

Matthew 6:31-32

Mark 14:36

Hebrews 2:18

Ephesians 6:10

Isaiah 58:6-7

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.