



# The Practicing the Way Course

Teaching Notes

Session 04: The Practices

## Intro:

- Every Friday night, my family and I sit down to our table with our community ... As the sun goes down, we power off all our devices, take a few deep breaths, light two candles, and pray to enter the Sabbath.
- The Sabbath is a day like no other.
- It's an entire twenty-four hours set aside to stop, rest, delight, and worship.
- We don't work, or do chores, or run errands, or shop.
- We just relax and feast and laugh and talk and sleep and *just be* ...
- The sabbath is — for our family and community — the *best* day of the week, and an essential anchor for our life with God and each other.
- And the Sabbath is one of the practices of Jesus — ancient spiritual disciplines from the life of Jesus himself that are utterly key to apprenticeship to Jesus ...

**Seam:** But what exactly are the practices?

## Jesus' practices:

- If you were to follow Jesus around for a while, you would notice a set of repeating practices.
- You would see him preach the gospel and heal the sick and cast out demons; and you would also see him keep Sabbath, read scripture, and spend time in solitude and prayer ...
- You would see Jesus live by a set of practices that were the foundation for his life as a whole.

**Seam:** And the practices of Jesus are the key to unlock our spiritual formation.

- In Mark 1 we read:
  - “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” (Mark 1v35)
- Why is this story in Mark's gospel? It isn't a story of a miracle; it's just a small detail about Jesus' morning prayer rhythm.
- The four biographies of Jesus in the New Testament are *full* of small details like this:
- Jesus getting up early to pray in the quiet, keeping Sabbath, fasting, eating meals with his community — his way of life.

- These small details that we see repeat all through the life of Jesus are the practices.
- Also known as “the spiritual disciplines.”
- But what are the practices, exactly?
  - The practices are disciplines based on the lifestyle of Jesus that create time and space for us to access the presence and power of the Spirit, and in doing so, be transformed from the inside out.
    - “The practices are disciplines” — or habits ...
    - “Based on the lifestyle of Jesus” — all of them come straight out of the pattern laid down by Jesus himself.
    - “That create time and space” — they slow our life down and open our life up ...
    - “To access the presence and power of the Spirit” — they are how we draw on God’s energy to change ...
    - “And in doing so, be transformed from the inside out ...”
- In other words, they are *how* we apprentice under Jesus.
- The practices come in all kinds of shapes and sizes ...
- But you can group them into nine basic disciplines:
  - Sabbath — an entire day set aside to stop, rest, delight, and worship.
  - Prayer — intentional time to communicate and commune with God.
  - Fasting — going without food in order to give yourself more fully to Jesus, purge your body of sin, hear and be heard by God in prayer, and stand in solidarity with the poor.
  - Solitude — intentional time in the quiet to be alone with yourself and God.
  - Scripture — immersing your mind and imagination in the library of the Bible.
  - Community — doing life with other followers of Jesus around a table, in deep, loving friendship.
  - Generosity — the giving of our money and resources.
  - Service — following Jesus’ example in meeting the practical needs of others, especially the most vulnerable.
  - Witness — practicing hospitality and preaching the gospel of Jesus.

- Think of the nine practices as *categories* that all contain sub-practices.
- For example, Sabbath includes worship on Sunday, gratitude, and celebration.
- Community includes the confession of sin and the Lord's Supper.
- Scholars call practices like these nine the “classical disciplines,” because they are for *all* people for *all* time.
- No matter what your personality is ... And no matter what stage of life you're in ... some version of these nine ancient disciplines should find their way into the lifestyle of every apprentice of Jesus.
- The practices of Jesus are utterly key to being transformed into people who are *like* Jesus as we slow our busy lives down to live deeply connected to God.
- This course was designed to be an on-ramp into a life of practices, and we have an entire library of additional resources available from Practicing the Way that are designed to integrate these nine ancient disciplines into your everyday life, because we believe they are essential to spiritual formation.
- But it must be said that *almost anything* can become a spiritual discipline *if* we offer it up to God as a channel of grace.
- Including activities we love and enjoy — like hiking, or reading poetry, or listening to music ...
- And the mundane activities that consume most of our time — driving to work, folding laundry, going for a run.
- And even including the responsibilities and relationships that we find difficult or even painful — caring for an infant that won't sleep through the night, or caring for your aging parents; quietly suffering a chronic illness; staying faithful to a difficult marriage — any of these can become a channel of grace if we offer them up to God.

**Seam:** This course will focus on “the classical disciplines,” but whenever you talk about the practices, three very important things need to be said:

- First,

## 1. The practices are not a measure of spiritual maturity

- Yes, a disciple of Jesus is a “disciplined one,” and yes, a more mature disciple of Jesus is more likely to live by a regimen of practices and a less mature one is likely to be more free-spirited and undisciplined

- But. Love is the metric of spiritual maturity, not discipline
- The question is not: How often do you read your Bible? or How long do you pray? or How often do you go to church?
- It's: How loving are you?
- Love as modeled by Jesus himself is how we chart our progress.
- Secondly ...

## 2. They are not a form of spiritual merit

- I'm sure the Father is overjoyed by any overtures we make in his direction, but when we practice Sabbath or fast and pray, we're not earning credit in some kind of cosmic ledger.
- The disciplines are motivated by love, not fear or shame; but by our desire to be with Jesus, and be transformed into people of love, like him.
- This is especially important to say for those of you who grew up in the suffocating air of legalism or under the heavy weight of a performance oriented family or culture; you may be wary of any talk of discipline or practice; but the practices don't earn grace, they open us up to receive the free gift of grace in the deepest part of our being.
  - Willard used to say, "Grace isn't opposed to effort, it's opposed to earning,"<sup>1</sup>
- The practices do require effort, though over time they make our life much *easier*, not harder. But they are not earning a thing.
- Finally ... and most importantly ...

## 3. They are a *means to an end*

- The goal isn't to practice spiritual disciplines, it's to be with Jesus and become like him ...
- In their book *The Relational Soul*, the psychologists Richard Plass and James Cofield write:
  - "Spiritual disciplines are not an end in themselves. They are means to an end. ... Disciplines set the soul on the path where it can come to know God and live present to others in love."<sup>2</sup>
- Another way to say this is: We practice the disciplines so *that* we can obey the commands of Jesus.
- Think about some of the commands of Jesus in the New Testament:
  - "Do not worry about tomorrow." (Matthew 6v34)

- “Be anxious for nothing.” (Philippians 4v6)
- “Rejoice in the Lord.” (Philippians 4v4)
- “Bear one another’s burdens.” (Galatians 6v2)
- “Be patient” (Ephesians 4v2)
- “Be completely humble and gentle” (Ephesians 4v2)
- “Forgive one another.” (Colossians 3v13)
- “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22v39)
- “Love your enemies.” (Matthew 5v44)
- And of course the greatest commandment of all: “Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, soul, mind and strength.” (Mark 12v30)
- Most of us can’t go out and consistently obey these commands — not yet.
- The practices are how we do what we *can* do — practice Sabbath, begin our day in the quiet, read Scripture, eat a meal with community, etc. — in order to be formed into people who can eventually do what we currently *cannot* do: live and love like Jesus
- For example, from a young age, I’ve had a running struggle with anxiety.
- I read Jesus’ command in the Sermon on the Mount — “Do not worry about your life” — and I genuinely *want* to obey it.
- But then I get one text message with bad news and my body is shot through with a jolt of fear! Or I go through a stressful situation and I can’t fall asleep at night.
- Why?
- I *desire* to obey Jesus’ teachings. And I have the Spirit of Jesus in me. But I have yet to be formed into the kind of person who can live worry free.
- I can’t obey Jesus’ command and never worry again.
- But you know what I *can* do?
- I can practice Sabbath ... I can set aside an entire day to practice trusting in God, I can let him run the world without me for at least twenty-four hours ...
- I can begin my day in the quiet ... rather than waking up to my phone and news alerts and noise ... I can breathe in the peace of God; I can read Scripture and turn my attention to the truth of God ...

- I can live in community, and share my anxieties with my brothers and sisters, and bear them together.
- And through the practices, I can offer my anxieties and attachments up to God for him to heal me and set me free.
- Here's a dynamic I've learned about spiritual formation: We can approach small changes directly.
- Small changes — like beginning our day by reading a Psalm rather than looking at our phone or going to church rather than sleeping in or cussing less often — are usually within the range of our willpower.
- We can *stop* doing them or *start* doing them.
- But most of the deeper changes in our spiritual formation are far beyond the range of our willpower.
  - For me, it's things like living without anxiety ...
  - Or being kind to my family when I'm tired or stressed ...
  - Or forgiving people when they hurt me deeply.
- I desire to do these things! But I can't. Not yet.
- I can't approach them directly, but I *can* come at them *indirectly*, through the practices.
- I can't not worry, but I can keep sabbath.
- I can't not lust, but I can change what I watch on TV.
- I can't be completely free of greed, but I can practice generosity.
- And over a long period of time, as I follow Jesus' apprenticeship program, he *will* slowly but surely transform me into a person of love.

## Set up for group conversation:

- I love to hear the heart behind the practices. It's so easy to lose sight of the big picture in the humdrum and rhythms of our lives.
- In just a minute, Ken is going to walk us through this coming week's practice of Sabbath.
- We chose to introduce this practice to you early on because, in our day and in this age, most people are simply too tired, busy, and worn down to have any meaningful spiritual life at all. For many in our world, the spiritual journey *begins* with rest.

- For many of you, this may be your first excursion into this ancient discipline, and it likely draws up all sorts of thoughts and feelings.
- Let's process it together for a few minutes before we move on ...
- Here's a few questions for your time ...
  1. What's your experience with the spiritual disciplines? What practices have you engaged with in your spiritual journey?
  2. If the practices are the means, what do you understand the end of the spiritual life to be?
  3. Who has most reflected God's love to you? Where did you see the life of Jesus at work in them?
  4. Do you practice any kind of sabbath or day of rest? Or is this a new discipline for you?
- Enjoy your conversation ...

## Set Up:

- Welcome back.
- Go ahead and open to Session 04 in your Guide for our tutorial, as well as more resources for you to explore if you so desire.
- Also, this coming week we are reading *Practicing the Way*, part 4.
- Now we're ready to hear more about how to actually practice the Sabbath.

## Tutorial:

### **Week 4: Sabbath**

- Years ago, when I was working in the corporate world, I was making a very good salary. Far more than I needed to live on.
- But this was also the unhappiest time of my life.
- I felt like I was a slave to work.
- I knew something needed to change. During this time, I began to practice Sabbath. It was life-changing.

- I began to feel more connected to God, my soul, and the most important people in my life — and I felt more joy ...
- Now, years later the Sabbath continues to serve as a vital part of my life.
- While the Sabbath will look different for each person (and the Sabbath isn't just a day of religious to-do's), here's part of how the day often looks for me.
  - On my Sabbath, I go off my devices for the day (unless I am specifically wanting to connect with someone). In the morning, I'll take a long walk with our golden retriever, Sasha, on the beach or through a forest trail, and I will give thanks to God for the gifts of my life thus far.
  - At noon, I'll have lunch with my wife, Sakiko, and we enjoy unhurried time together. Later in the afternoon, I might go on a run or a bike ride with our teenage son, Joey, in a nearby park or connect with a friend.
  - On my Sabbath, I will also make dinner (which doesn't feel like work to me because it's so different from my everyday work, and I usually cook only once a week). This also gives my wife, who cooks the rest of the week, a Sabbath, and we enjoy dinner as a family.
- The Sabbath, to use Abraham Joshua Heschel's phrase, is a "palace in time" where we delight in God, life itself, and the people who are most important to us. Ann Voskamp says, "It's a gift we cannot afford to refuse."
- Our practice for this week is to set aside space for a Sabbath.
- Actually *experiencing* the Sabbath day requires some preparation. To support you through this, we have prepared a practical tool in the course guide to help you plan for this day.
- Twenty-four hours is a major commitment, and it takes some work to give up work.
- So our recommendation is to start small. If a full twenty-four hour Sabbath is too much for this coming week, just carve out a few hours — perhaps on Sunday afternoon after church, or on Saturday, or whenever there is a good slot in your weekly schedule.
- We also recommend the following:
  1. First, begin your Sabbath celebration by connecting with God. You might start with a ritual that helps remind you that God is present as you anticipate the day you will be enjoying together. You might begin by lighting a candle or with a prayer of thanksgiving, by reading a passage of Scripture or participating in a worship service at church.
  2. Second, when possible, share at least part of the Sabbath with your friends and family

— the most important people in your life. You might share a meal, or enjoy an activity or an outing, or set aside space to walk or have tea and conversation together.

3. Third, engage in things that make you come alive in God, who faithfully provides for us even as we take time away from work. My friend Mark Buchanan says, “The golden rule of Sabbath is to cease from what is necessary and to embrace what gives life.” For some of us, this might involve walking through a forest trail or hiking up a mountain. Others find life while listening to music, playing in a jam session, or viewing a beautiful work of art. Some feel joy when they get lost in a captivating novel or movie. Others love eating delicious food. Many feel deep joy when they spend time with someone they love.

- Pursue whatever activities make you feel joyful, rested, and alive to God.
- You can find more suggestions in your companion Guide.
- You can also find additional resources from Practicing the Way if you’re interested in pursuing the Sabbath further.
- May you deeply enjoy your life with God as you practice the Sabbath.

## Summary:

- To review this episode:
  - The practices are disciplines based on the lifestyle of Jesus that create time and space for us to access the presence and power of the Spirit, and in doing so, be transformed from the inside out.
  - Practices are a means to an end; the end is to live and love like Jesus.
  - We approach deeper changes in our life indirectly, not directly, by practicing ancient disciplines that open us up to God to change us at the deepest level.
  - Practices are *not* the whole of the spiritual life, they are just one part of it.
  - But they are essential for all those who deeply desire to be transformed to become more like Jesus.
  - And one of the most important practices for our age of exhaustion is Sabbath. A full day set aside to stop, rest, delight, and worship.

## Outro:

- Let me offer you one final word about all of this ...
- The number one problem you will face in your spiritual formation is time.
- Most of us are just too busy, tired, and digitally distracted to have any meaningful spiritual life at all.
- Dallas Willard once called hurry “the great enemy of spiritual life in our day,” and gave this key piece of advice: “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.”
- One way to think about discipleship to Jesus in the modern era is as a disciplined effort to slow your life down and simplify it around what is most essential.
- This is key: apprenticeship to Jesus doesn’t work like a hobby, that you add on to your already overbusy, hurried life.
- “Less is more” in the way of Jesus.
- It isn’t about addition, but subtraction.
- As we integrate the practices of Jesus into our busy lives, we have to ask, What can I cut *out* of my life, not just add in? What can I *not* do, in order to *do* life with Jesus?
- Because it’s not about increasing complexity, but pursuing simplicity.
- It’s about living at the pace of Jesus ...
- What the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama called “the speed of love.”<sup>3</sup>
- 1 Corinthians 13 says “love is patient.” Another way to translate that is “love is unhurried.”
- So, as you begin to organize your life around the practices of Jesus, may you feel the grace of God upon you to unhurry, to breathe, to say no ... in order to say yes to Jesus.

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## Notes

1. *The Great Omission* (2006)
2. *The Relational Soul* (2014)
3. *Three Mile an Hour God* (1980)