



The Practicing the Way Course

Teaching Notes

Session 05: Meeting God in Pain and Suffering

Intro:

- Jesus once said, “In this world, you will face trouble.” (John 16v33)
- Suffering comes to find *all* of us — the loss of a loved one, a cancer diagnosis, the breakdown of a relationship ...
- And over time, emotional pain accumulates in our soul; we carry our history in our body and live our past in our present; and all too often, our unhealed emotional pain sabotages our spiritual formation into people of love.

Seam: When pain and suffering come knocking on our door, what do we do?

Set up:

- We left off last week with the practices of Jesus — ancient spiritual disciplines by which we open our life to God.
- Now, I love the practices, but let’s shoot straight for a minute ...
- Maybe your experience with the practices over the last few weeks was pure bliss; you felt close to Jesus, and drawn into the Trinity’s inner life of love ...
- But maybe *not*.
- When I first started on this inner journey, there were times in prayer where I would experience something that was, for me, counter-intuitive, but I realized later, very common: I went into it expecting to feel happy and peaceful, but instead, I would often feel all sorts of emotional pain.
- I would find myself feeling anger at someone who hurt me in my past, or feeling anxiety over my future ...
 - I would find myself suffering from what psychologists call “afflictive thoughts.”
 - If that was your experience, you are *not* alone.
- Often what happens in the practices is ... when we slow down and come to quiet before God ... all our undigested emotional pain — that we’ve pushed down in the busyness of life — comes *up* ... from the shadow to the surface of our heart ...
- The Cisterian monk Thomas Keating said that the first thing that comes up in quiet prayer is what he called, “the unloading of the unconscious.”
- He writes:

- “When we commit ourselves to the spiritual journey, the first thing the Spirit does is start removing the emotional junk of a lifetime that is inside of us.”¹
- When this happens, it does *not* mean you’re “bad” at the practices — this is all part of the process of spiritual formation.
- The practices are *not* a religious formula to habit stack our way to Christlike character!
- Rather, the practices create time and space for the unprocessed emotional pain of a lifetime — from our childhood wounds from twenty years ago to a passing slight from a co-worker the day before — to come out of the shadows and into the light, where they can be healed.

Seam: In the therapy world, they call emotional pain a “trailhead.”

Emotional pain:

- Pain is an invitation from your soul to explore a path in your story, to follow it down to its origin point in search of healing.
- Think about the role of pain in the *body* — when you get hurt, pain is your body’s way of forcing you to give attention to a part of you in need of attention, healing, and love.
- The pain is a signal to your mind, something is wrong in your body and in need of healing.
- *Emotional* pain is very similar — it’s often a signal from our soul that some aspect of our person is in need of attention, healing, and love.

Seam: The problem is, the modern world does not know how to deal with pain ...

Three ways to deal with emotional pain:

- There are three common cultural responses to emotional pain:
- The first is to ...

1. Deny

- You just deny that you *have* pain.
- This is the most popular response in a lot of Christian circles, because it’s so easy for us to spiritualize our denial as faith in God.
- The psychologist John Welwood called this “spiritual bypassing,” which he defined as

a “tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.”²

- It’s a (futile) attempt to co-opt the Christian theology of hope to skip over our pain and chase the Western life script up and to the right.
- The thing about denial is: it works incredibly well!
- It is the most effective of all coping strategies.
- The problem is, it’s a short term strategy, and it’s incredibly dangerous.
- Think of physical pain: if you get hurt and it’s not dangerous, your body will likely self-heal, just give it a few days or weeks; but if you have a pain your body that won’t go away, it’s highly likely that something is seriously wrong, and if you deny it or ignore it or pretend it’s not real, it could grow and damage you or even kill you long term.
- Sigmund Freud was wrong about almost everything, but he was right that whatever we refuse to face in our inner lives has the most power over us.
- Denying any part of our inner life, especially those parts that are in need of a healing touch, always has destructive consequences — on us, *and* on others.
- The second option is ... You ...

2. Detach

- You emotionally disconnect from your feelings.
- Certain personality types seem to have the ability to cut off their emotional pain.
- But if we cut off our emotional pain, we inadvertently cut ourselves off to *the whole spectrum of emotion* — *lows and highs*; we don’t feel sadness, but neither do we feel joy or wonder or gratitude.
- Of course the most popular way people deal with their pain is to drug it ...

3. Drug

- Many people *literally* drug their pain ... with alcohol or cannabis or pain meds ...
- But most of us drug our pain more figuratively — with our cultural narcotic of choice.
 - It could be work or our career
 - Or sex

- Or romance
- Or social media ...
- Or entertainment — TV and film and video games ...
- It could be *anything* that is used as a distraction from our pain and our God, rather than a pathway through our pain *to* God ...
- When we turn to drugs, either literally or figuratively, we feel a momentary relief from our pain, but ultimately, we make our anxiety or sadness *worse*, not better.
- But none of these ways of dealing with emotional pain are the Jesus way.
- The Jesus way is to meet God *in* our pain.

The Jesus Way:

- What does the Jesus way look like?
- Let's read from Matthew 26, which is, arguably, the most painful moment in Jesus' life.
- It's the night before the cross, when he's feeling the weight of what's coming: Judas' betrayal, his best friend's denial, his disciples' abandonment, his coming rejection, humiliation, torture, and brutal death ...
- What does he do?
 - Does he *deny* it?
 - "It's okay, God has a plan. Other people have it way worse."
 - No.
 - Does he *detach*?
 - "It is what it is..."
 - No.
 - Does he *drug*?
 - "Hey guys, let's go out for one last night on the town."
 - No.
- He goes to a quiet place, a garden called Gethsemane, with his closest friends, and we read this:

- “Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” (Matthew 26:36-39)
- Notice the line, “he began to be sorrowful ...”
- He intentionally makes space for all his feelings of sadness to come up — and he meets God in his pain by offering his feelings up to God in prayer.
- This practice — what has come to be called “lament” - is a key feature of what pastor Pete Scazzero calls “emotionally healthy spirituality.”
- Scazzero’s thesis is that “it is impossible to be spiritually mature, while remaining emotionally immature.”³
- But emotional health doesn’t mean you’re happy all the time!
- Jesus was the most emotionally healthy person to ever live and in Luke’s version of the story we just read, Jesus begins to sweat blood, a medical condition called “hematohidrosis,” which is brought on by extreme duress.
- Emotional health means:
 1. You’re aware of your feelings
 - You have the capacity to notice and name your inner life.
 - In a spirit of welcome and gentleness ...
 2. But you’re not run by your feelings
 - You have the capacity to sit with your feelings and let your body process them before God in prayer ... without them causing you to behave in unloving ways.
 - Psychologists call this “emotional regulation.” And the New Testament calls it “self-control.”
 - But to become emotionally healthy means we have to go on “the inner journey,” as some call it, to meet God in our pain ... we have to learn how to pray our pain to God, and share our pain with each other.
 - This is why so many find therapy to be a key part of the inner journey.
 - Processing our pain with an older, wiser, loving soul can be deeply healing.

- But through practices like silence and solitude and prayer and therapy and friendship ... we create time and space to process our pain and suffering with God and in community.

Seam: This is often a slow, painful process, but it is the crucible of our formation!

Pain the crucible:

- Pain and suffering are inevitable in life.
- Again, Jesus: “In this world, you *will* face trouble.” (John 16v33)
- Not “may,” but “*will*.”
- There is no version of life where you do not feel emotional pain.
- The Jesus we follow was betrayed, abandoned, falsely accused, unjustly treated, and killed.
- The prophet Isaiah called him “a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.” (Isaiah 53v3)
- The writer of Hebrews said, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are.” (Hebrews 4v15)
- And while few of us have ever experienced the level of trauma that Jesus did, we have all been hurt, wounded, and thrown into trials and tribulations.
- Left *unhealed*, the unresolved emotional pain of a lifetime will sabotage our spiritual formation into people of love.
- If we allow hurt and anger and bitterness and fear to fester in our soul ... it will undermine our best intentions to become like Jesus.
- “Hurt people hurt people,” as the saying goes.
- Psychologists give us categories like trauma, attachment, emotional triggers, and more to name the unhealthy patterns that arise from pain and suffering and in turn, ruin relationships and block our transformation.
- *But*.
- Jesus *went on to say*, “Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world!” (John 16v33)
- Because of Jesus’ incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension — no pain and suffering is meaningless, as it is in a secular worldview, because death and all his friends have been “overcome” by Jesus ...

- Which means the very pain and suffering that can sabotage our spiritual formation can become the secret *to* our spiritual formation!
- Our *breakdowns* can become our *breakthroughs*.
- The risen Christ has the power to take any evil — no matter how heinous — and use it for good.
- *Nothing* is wasted!
- Paul writes in Romans:
 - “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8v28)
- James says it this way:
 - Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1v2-4)
- Peter adds this:
 - “For a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (1 Peter 1v6-7)
- Do you see it?
- The very pain that we all want to deny or detach from or drug is the pathway to our transformation.
- *If* we, like Jesus, will only meet God in our pain ...

Set up for group conversation:

- Touching on our emotional pain can bring up quite a lot.
- You may be feeling things right now that you’ve pushed down for many years, or are painful to hold.
- So we want to give you a chance to share openly and let others hold your pain with you ...
- You may not be ready for that, that’s okay. Just be as open and transparent as you can ...

- Here's a few questions to guide your conversation:
 1. Can you tell one story of a painful experience you've been through that has been used for good in your formation?
 2. How have you experienced God in times of pain and suffering?
 3. Which of the three responses to emotional pain are you most inclined towards: deny, detach, or drug? What has that looked like in your life?
 4. What could it look like for you to reorient yourself to the pain in your life as an opportunity to be formed by God?
- Now let's have a conversation ...

Set up:

- This coming week we are reading part 5 of the *Practicing the Way* book.
- In your Companion Guide, you'll find extra resources to go further, but go ahead and open to Session 05, as we prepare for this week's spiritual exercise ...

Tutorial:

Week 5: Noticing and Naming Your Emotions

- When I've entered into a time of silence with God, there have been times when I have experienced a sense of God's peace, love, and joy.
- But there have also been times in the silence, like John Mark's experience, when anxiety has risen up in my heart, or a feeling of anger, resentment, or envy towards someone.
- I name these emotions and then lift them up to God in prayer.
- The journey into emotional health involves learning to notice and name our emotions in the presence of God.
- When we notice and name our feelings they have less power over us. If you were to name a painful emotion like fear, anger, disappointment, or jealousy, a brain scan would show that your very act of naming it quiets that emotion. This is why psychiatrist Dan Siegel encourages us to "name it to tame it."
- This week for our practice, we are inviting you, during your rhythm of daily prayer, to set aside time on a particular day for a specific prayer exercise that we have prepared in your

guide called noticing and naming your emotions. The purpose of this prayer is to bring your emotions to God and experience his love and presence.

- Begin by finding a quiet place that's distraction free (without devices) to pray.
- Take a few deep breaths, relax, and center.
- There are four steps to this prayer exercise:
 1. First, *notice* your emotions. Let your emotions rise up within you.
 2. Second, *name* your emotions. Be as specific as possible.
 3. Third: *feel* the emotions. Don't fight the emotion, fret over it, or run from it. When we fight an emotion, it gets bigger — not smaller. Let the emotion rise like a wave, peak, and then pass you by. After ninety seconds, an unimpeded emotion will typically transform on its own.
 4. Fourth and finally, *offer* your feeling to God. Express your emotion to God and entrust your life to him. You may want to set aside space to name an emotion you are carrying once this week — or a few times.
- As you do this, some of you might have a profound experience, but others may wonder, “am I doing it “right”? Like most practices, the deepest impact happens over time as the practice becomes a part of our life. So don't feel any pressure this week — give it a try, reflect on it and then process it with your group in the next session.
- You can engage this powerful exercise for the rest of your life as you walk with God and seek to open your inner world to him.
- May God give you courage and peace as you name your emotions this week.

Summary:

- In this episode we covered these key points:
 - The practices are *not* a religious formula to habit-stack our way into spiritual formation.
 - When we slow down and come to quiet before God, often the first thing that comes up is emotional pain, as our soul begins to process and discharge all the pain and suffering of our life.
 - There are three primary ways people deal with pain:
 - Deny

- Detach or
- Drug
- But the Jesus way is to meet God *in* our pain.
- Left unhealed, emotional pain can sabotage our transformation. But if we open it to God, it can become the secret *to* our transformation.

Outro:

- In closing, some of you are in pain right now ...
- The essential question in difficult times is: How do we let our pain and suffering become a portal to God and his transformation?
- How do we let it form us, and not *deform* us?
- The answer is: We accept Jesus' invitations.
- There's a metaphor I find helpful from the Christian psychologist Larry Crabb:⁴
- Imagine your emotional life like an iceberg ...
 - Above the surface is what Dr. Crabb calls "the managed life," where our focus is on living by a set of principles to be successful. Our driving question is: How do I look and feel good?
 - But inevitably, we get hurt, betrayed, rejected, let down, and we slip down to what he calls "the wounded life," where our driving question is: What can I do to get back to looking and feeling good?
 - Most of our life is here, below the surface.
 - And the invitation of Jesus is *not* to go up and out of our pain, but down and into it ... to meet God *in* our pain, in what Dr. Crabb calls "the formed life," where our question becomes: What is God doing through this and in me?
 - *That*, that is the question of an apprentice of Jesus.
- This means we do not need to fear suffering! As Jesus' said, "Do not let your heart be troubled." (John 14v27) You don't need to be afraid.
- We don't need to seek it out; it will come and find us.
- But when it does, if we meet God in it ... he can turn all of it for good, if we only surrender to him ... day by day.

- And we can say with Julian of Norwich: “All will be well, all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well.”⁵

Notes

1. *Open Mind, Open Heart* (1994)
2. “*Principles of Inner Work: Psychological and Spiritual*,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (1984)
3. *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (2006)
4. *Inside Out* (1988)
5. *Revelations of Divine Love* (1670)