



# The Practicing the Way Course

Teaching Notes

## Session 08: Life Together

## Intro:

- There's an ancient proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together."
- From time immemorial, teachers of the Way of Jesus have likened apprenticeship to a kind of spiritual journey.
- A long, winding journey of becoming a person of love in God.
- And like the proverb says, it is a journey that we were designed to go on *together*. In community.

## Recap:

- Over the last seven sessions, we laid out a foundation for a life of apprenticeship to Jesus.
1. We began with the three driving goals of an apprentice:
    - Be with Jesus
    - Become like him
    - And do as he did.
  2. Then we covered spiritual formation, and said we've already been formed, or *deformed*.
  3. Therefore, all formation in the Way of Jesus is counter formation.
  4. This brought us to the practices of Jesus. The practices are how we do what we can do so that Jesus *can* do what we currently *cannot* do — transform us to live and love like him.
  5. But the practices only take us so far; we then have to meet God in our pain and suffering and go on the inner journey.
  6. What the Bible calls "sin" is a major obstacle on that journey. So we covered the layers of sin and how we heal through the practice of confession.
  7. This all built up to a climax: crafting a Rule of Life. A schedule and a set of practices and relational rhythms to organize our lives around spiritual formation.
    - And along the way, we intentionally put these ideas into practice ... by integrating spiritual

disciplines like quiet, prayer, scripture reading, and Sabbath into our busy lives to slow down and simplify our life around God.

- Today we come to our final session.
- But to say it again, this course is just a *primer*.
- You have a lifelong journey of following Jesus ahead of you.
- But before you go, we need to key in on one final idea that is of the *utmost* importance: *You are not meant to go on this journey alone*.
- You are meant to follow Jesus in community.

**Seam:** We started this course with Jesus' invitation in Mark 1:

- "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1v17-18)
- Notice: Jesus did not have an *apprentice* (singular); he had *apprentices* (plural).
- Meaning: Jesus' invitation was to come and do life together.

**Seam:** Just a few pages later, we read this ...

- Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ... (Mark 3v13-14)
- Why 12?
- Why not 21 or 100?
- Because this is a highly symbolic act; Jesus is intentionally naming 12 disciples to evoke the 12 tribes of Israel.
- It's Jesus' way of saying he is forming a new family ...
- What we call the Church is not a building, or an event; it is a new family, *not* based on blood, but on apprenticeship to Jesus ...

**Seam:** Just a few *sentences* later, we read this ...

- A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my

brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."  
(Mark 3v32-35)

- The word Jesus used for brother and sister is *adelphoi* in Greek, it literally means sibling.
- It comes as no surprise that in the writings of the New Testament, the word *adelphoi* is the only other moniker used just as frequently as apprentice.
- The Apostle Paul uses *adelphoi* over 130 times in his letters.
- One of the main ways Paul and the New Testament writers explain Jesus' work is through the metaphor of adoption.
- Through Jesus, we have been adopted into the family of God; God has become our father, Jesus our older brother, and our fellow apprentices have become our siblings.
  - When my wife and I adopted our daughter Sunday, she became both our daughter, and Jude and Moses' sister ... she became part of a new family.
- In the same way, to become an apprentice of Jesus is to become a part of a new family.
- One that transcends all the lines that divide us — race, class, gender, politics, all of it ...
- Meaning (and please listen!): Jesus' desire is not just to form *you* into a *person* of love; but to form a *community* of love.

**Seam:** Now, this has all sorts of implications for our apprenticeship to Jesus.

- You can't follow Jesus alone.
- Not you shouldn't; you can't.
- The *whole point* of the spiritual journey is to become a person of love.
- Jesus called love the "greatest commandment."
- Dr. Todd Hall of Rosemead School of Psychology calls the Christian faith a "relational spirituality," by which we are loved into people of love.<sup>1</sup>
- This means that spiritual formation is a *relational* process.
- You simply won't get very far in your spiritual journey if you try to go it alone.
- Dr. Joseph Hellerman put it this way:
  - "Spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community. Persons who remain contented with their brothers and sisters in the local church almost invariably grow in self-understanding. And they mature in their ability to relate in healthy

ways to God and to their fellow human beings. This is especially the case for those courageous Christians who stick it out through the often messy process of interpersonal discord and conflict resolution. Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life. People who stay grow. People who leave do not grow.”<sup>2</sup>

- This is why church is so essential.
- And by “church,” I don’t just mean church “attendance.”

**Seam:** Sunday worship is an essential part of our formation, but while God works through *all* shapes and sizes and styles of churches, it’s usually in the smaller, more relational spaces where we experience the most profound change.

## Four circles of community:

- There is a growing body of research from the social sciences that groups relationships into different categories based on *group size* and the *depth of vulnerability*.
- One of the most widely accepted paradigms is from Dr. Robin Dunbar of Oxford.
- It’s called “Dunbar’s Number”:<sup>3</sup>
  1. He calls our inner circle our “intimates” — this is 1 to 5 people (max), who deeply know us as we are; our shadow, and our light; and who, ideally, love us as we are.
    - Of course, many in the West have *no* intimates.
    - The fallout of Western individualism and the breakdown of the family.
    - But hopefully you have a few people you can bare your soul to — a spouse or best friend or mentor.
    - The next circle is ...
  2. Our friends — which goes up to 15 people.
    - This is the people we do life with: We practice the “one another’s” of the New Testament
    - we help each other move, we go on vacation together, we share meals, we drop off groceries when people are sick
    - This is our *community*.
  3. The next threshold is around the 150 person mark.

- Sociologists call this “The Law of 150,” as 150 is about the maximum number of people we can be in relationship with; and it’s the optimal group size for human organization.
- While there are some very large churches, this is also about the size of most local churches.
- And we draw on this wider social network for all sorts of things. This is our village, per se.

4. The final circle is our “tribe” — the larger group we identify with and belong to.

- We don’t know all these people personally, but this group is where we get a vision of life and a call to live with meaning and purpose.
- For many in the secular world, this could be a company or a political party or a sports team.
- For us as followers of Jesus, this is the *Church* of Jesus ...

- And when it comes to our spiritual formation ...

### **1. We need relationships across all four circles.**

- Jesus had relationships at every layer:
  - He had three intimates — Peter, James, and John.
  - He had the 12 and a few close friends like Mary and Martha.
  - Then he had the group of 120 in Jerusalem.
  - Then the larger church he left behind ...
  - Healthy people have relationships in all four circles.
  - But ...

### **2. Our deepest formation, growth, healing, and change all happens in the smaller circles.**

- We all need what Celtic Christians called an *anam cara*, or a “soul friend.” To bear our most vulnerable burdens with.
- C.S. Lewis once said the essence of friendship can be summed up in the phrase “You too?!”<sup>4</sup>
- Meaning, friends come together around a shared joy, like backpacking or surfing or reading fiction ...

- In a spiritual friendship, the shared joy is *Jesus*.
- *And* we need a community to do life with.
- We were created to live deeply relational lives, and it's in the first two circles of our *closest* community that we experience deep, lasting transformation.

## Three core components:

- And yet, we all have mixed feelings about these deep relationships.
- Part of us aches for connection ... to God and to others ... we desire to know and be known ... to give and receive love.
- But part of us is terrified of connection, especially if in our childhood we did not receive safe, steady love from our parents or caregivers, or if we've been deeply wounded along the way.
- The therapist Susie Hausch once said, "Our deepest wounds come from relationships, but so does our deepest healing."
- These deeper relationships are *essential* to our healing and growth.
- And yet, in our modern world of radical individualism, digital distraction, and transience, these types of relationships will not just fall on our head!
- They will require us to make an intentional effort.
- So, before we go, let me name what these relationships look like:

**Seam:** Spiritual friendships are marked by three core characteristics:

- The first is ...

### 1. Depth

- These are *not* superficial relationships where we chat about the weather or our work projects or what show we're watching on TV.
- We talk about what's *below* the surface.
- We talk about our life with *God*, our pain, our suffering, our sin — where the growth edge is in our formation.
- But it's not just depth, it's also ...

## 2. Vulnerability

- We come together around our weakness, not just our strength!
- We are raw, honest, and transparent with each other about what Jesus called our “spiritual poverty.”
- There are two parts to this:
  - One is telling the truth — or the practice of confession.
  - Naming our sin and shame to one another.
  - We can’t live without sin, but we *can* live without secrets.
  - The other is listening ...
    - Listening *deeply* to each other’s stories and struggles.
    - Neurobiologists tell us that when people “feel felt,” when they feel listened to in a compassionate way, it’s *indistinguishable* from feeling loved.
    - As we listen deeply to each other tell our stories, and help each other make sense of our stories in God, we experience real healing from both sin and shame.
- Finally is a ...

## 3. Commitment to transformation

- When monks join a monastery, they take vows, one of which is called *conversatio morum*, or “conversion of life,” which is essentially a vow to lifelong spiritual formation, to never stop growing in love ...
- Many people reach a certain level of spiritual maturity, and then plateau ... “I’m good.”
- But as apprentices of Jesus, we come together not just to be a safe place to process emotional pain; but ultimately, to give ourselves more deeply to Jesus.
- This means part of our relational dynamic is telling the truth *to each other*.
- I *need* people to both *comfort* me and *confront* me at times! To point out my potential, and also any pitfalls ....
- And while I rarely need a full on rebuke, I *regularly* need people to speak hard truths into my life.
- Spiritual friendships do not work if one member is not fully committed to the transformational journey.

**Recap:** Depth, vulnerability, and a commitment to transformation.

**Seam:** Here's the thing: It's possible to go to church every Sunday and even be in a small group, but never have these types of relationships.

- *I* was in the church for years and never had any relationships like this. I never let anyone get that close.
- When I first woke up to Jesus' call to community, I started small.
  - Our family began to share a weekly meal with a few other people.
  - Then a few of them moved into our neighborhood and we started doing life together — watching each other's kids, going running together, throwing block parties, going on vacations ...
  - Then we started to confess our sins to each other ...
  - Eventually we started living by a Rule of Life together ...
- We kept going to church on Sunday, but most of our life together wasn't around a stage; it was around a table.
- And as romantic as that may sound, we had to learn the hard way about what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the wish dream" of community.
- In his book *Life Together*, he writes:
  - "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial."
- No *actual* church or friendship can possibly live up to the wish dream of the *ideal* church or friendship.
- Honestly, I can tell you after many years of living in community, it is *not* easy, and when it goes wrong, it's incredibly painful.
- But when it goes *right*? It's a glimpse of eternity in time.
- Living in community has *changed my life*.
- I will *never* go back to just going to church on Sunday and living like an American individualist the other six days of the week.
- If you want to go far in your spiritual journey, cultivate a community of depth, vulnerability, and commitment to transformation, and follow Jesus together.

## Set up for group conversation:

- Now we've come to our final conversation together.
- Hopefully, by now, you've really come to know and love the people to your right and left.
- Let's process this call to community together.
- Here are a few questions to give shape to your discussion:
  1. Of the three relational characteristics named (depth, vulnerability, and a commitment to transformation), which is the hardest for you? How could you practice leaning into it going forward?
  2. As you reflect on your life and relationships, who has been or could be a "soul friend" to you on this spiritual formation journey? How could you be more intentional in that relationship?
  3. What has Jesus done in your life over the last eight weeks during our time together?
  4. What's your next step in your spiritual journey, your "next right thing"? What do you need to do and who do you need to help you to keep going forward?
- It's been such a joy to journey with you for this course.
- Now enjoy your final conversation together ...

## Tutorial:

### Week 8: Community

- Please open your guide to session 08 for this week's practice.
  - In our final week, we come to one of the most important practices of all: community. Almost all our formation occurs within the context of relationship.
- When you read the Gospels, you see that Jesus was in the synagogue every Sabbath, gathering with a group of worshipers for the reading of Scripture, teaching, prayer, and singing.
- As we noted earlier, Jesus also did life with his 12 disciples and some close friends.
- And he had an inner circle of *three* — Peter, James, and John — who were his closest companions on the Way.
- Altogether, Jesus had about a thousand days for his mission. He invested the vast majority of that time with a relatively small group of people: the 12 and the three.

- There is much we can learn from this. Though it's important to worship in church and be part of a larger community, it's just as important to know and name your "twelve" and your "three."
- This means that it is vital you have a few others you are engaged with in an *intentional* relationship.
- Relationships require time and energy, and they can lead to heartache. But it is in relationships where we experience life's greatest joys and almost all our transformation. The novelist Frederick Buechner has said, "You can survive on your own; you can grow strong on your own; you can prevail on your own; but you cannot become human on your own."<sup>5</sup>
- Our final practice is to identify our intentional community and begin to meet together, ideally weekly (or bi-weekly or monthly).
- This intentional community might be with one or two others, five or six, or around a dozen or even more. It's a circle of friends where you can grow to trust each other enough to be open and vulnerable.
- If you don't have something like this in place, could you initiate a group like this to foster spiritual friendships?
- There's no one "right" model to follow.
- We encourage you to follow the pathway of your church — whether in a small group, a table community, a house church, or a Bible study.
- What's most important is for you to identify your community. Who are your Peter, James, and John? Who are your 12? and then begin to meet regularly and intentionally as you seek to travel the Way together.
- You might follow up this course with one of the nine Practices from Practicing the Way, or you might read a book together, or take a class from BibleProject, or simply share a weekly meal and pray for one another.
- There's no formula to follow, but we have Jesus, and we follow him together.
- God bless you as you do life in community.

## Outro:

- And now we come to the end of our time together.
- The heart of this course is an invitation to become an apprentice of Jesus.
- To organize your life around three driving goals:

- Be with Jesus.
- Become like Jesus.
- Do as he did.
- And to follow Jesus in community — to live a deeply relational life with your fellow apprentices.
- But let me say it one final time: This is a *lifelong* journey.
- And *all* of us will stumble and fall along the way.
- The Finnish Orthodox writer Tito Colliander tells this story about a monk who was once asked, “What do you do there in the monastery?”
- And the monk said, “We fall and get up, fall and get up, fall and get up again.”<sup>6</sup>
- This *is* the spiritual journey: falling and getting back up, again and again over the course of a life.
- That’s why we need each other ... To never lose hope. But to keep following Jesus, and living in the hope of his soon return.

## Benediction:

- To end, let me send you off with a blessing ...
- May you apprentice under Jesus.
- And be formed into a person of love like Jesus.
- May you follow him in community ... in relationships of depth, vulnerability, and a commitment to spiritual formation.
- And when you stumble, may you get back up and begin again. With your eye set over the horizon to the hope of eternity.
- And may God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit draw you into their inner life of love and transform you into a person of love ... one day at a time ... as you are with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do as Jesus did.

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## Notes

1. *Relational Spirituality* (2021)
2. *When the Church Was a Family* (2009)
3. "Coevolution of neocortical size, group size and language in humans". *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (1993)
4. *The Four Loves* (1960)
5. *The Sacred Journey* (1982)
6. *Way of the Ascetics* (1985)