

Introducing Spiritual Practices

Introduction

Exploring Spiritual Practices

This course has been developed by the Inspire Network, working in partnership with the Methodist Church to support the vision of being a discipleship movement shaped for mission.

Introducing Spiritual Practices (this document, 4 pages)

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How to use Spiritual Practices (2 pages)

- Group leader's guide

Spiritual Practices Sessions (7 x 2 pages)

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Going Further with the Spiritual Practices (2 pages)

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So what is 'Inspire'?

Inspire is a discipleship movement, rooted in the Methodist tradition, which aims to support people's growth as mission-shaped disciples.

Inspire offers a simple framework for Christian disciples who want to grow in God's love and become more effective in sharing God's love with others.

Inspire is an ecumenical movement. Members of the Inspire Network come from all the major Christian denominations.

The Network creates resources to help people follow Jesus, and to form small fellowship bands for mutual support and encouragement.

Groups completing this course may like to consider forming Inspire fellowship bands as a way of continuing to meet for encouragement and growth in discipleship.

You can find out more about the Inspire Network by going to their website www.inspire-network.org.uk and on the Inspire page in the **Going Further** section of this resource.

Drawing closer to God

Seeking God

The aim of this course is to draw closer to God, through learning about – and using – the basic spiritual practices of Christian discipleship. Spiritual practices connect us to God in special ways, by opening up our ‘spiritual senses’ to God. They make God more ‘real’ to us. They enable us to *touch* God’s presence, *hear* God’s voice, *taste* God’s goodness, *see* God’s guidance, and *smell* the aroma of God’s presence in our daily lives. If you have an appetite to know God better, this course is for you!

In every session there will be Bible verses, wisdom from John Wesley (see below) and other material to consider together. This ‘sharing together’ is an important aspect of the way the course works. It is not a ‘study’ course as such, but a course that will help members of the group *learn from one another*, by sharing the wisdom and experience that is already within the group.

Wesley’s wisdom

John Wesley (see box) was an enthusiastic advocate of the spiritual practices for all who would like to know God better. He understood that if we want to know God better, we need to use the means that God has given to us for that purpose. In each session of the course, we will listen to some of his wisdom on the topics that we explore together and use him as a sort of ‘spiritual mentor’ in our times together.

Here is some of his teaching on the importance of the spiritual practices, taken from his sermon on The Sermon on the Mount. As you read, notice what Wesley says the spiritual practices produce in our lives.

O how meek and gentle, how lowly in heart, how full of love both to God and man, might you have been today, if you had only asked: – if you had continued instant in prayer! Therefore, now, at least, “ask, and it shall be given unto you.”

Ask that you may thoroughly experience, and perfectly practise, the whole of that religion that our Lord here [in the Sermon on the Mount] has so beautifully described. It shall then be given to you, to be holy as he is holy, both in heart and in all manner of conversation.

Seek in the way he has ordained, in **searching the Scriptures**, in hearing his word, in meditating thereon, in **fasting**, in partaking of the **Supper of the Lord**, and surely you shall find: you shall find that pearl of great price, that faith which overcomes the world, that peace which the world cannot give, that love which is the earnest of your inheritance.

Knock: continue in **prayer**, and in every other way of the Lord: be not weary or faint in your mind: press on to the mark: take no denial: let God not go until he bless you, and the door of mercy, of holiness, of heaven, shall be opened to you...

*But that your prayer may have its full weight with God, see that you be in charity with all people... Confirm your **love towards one another**, and towards everyone. And love them not in word only, but in deed and in truth...*

(John Wesley: Sermon ‘Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount’ – Discourse X)

John Wesley

In eighteenth-century Britain John Wesley founded a movement of radical Christian disciples, who came to be called Methodists.

Wesley was concerned to ensure that those who sought Christ through his preaching could be fed and nurtured in their faith journey.

He encouraged them to grow in God’s love, especially by using the spiritual practices that he called ‘the means of grace’.

He also recognised the vital importance of being in close fellowship with others, for mutual help and encouragement. His small groups (which he called ‘classes’ and the smaller ‘fellowship bands’) were at the very heart of his discipleship movement.

His *passion for authentic discipleship*, commitment to the *centrality of the means of grace*, and pioneering *use of small groups* make him an excellent mentor for this course!

Your group sessions

Introducing your group sessions

In each of your group sessions you will:

- **Connect** – a time to get to know one another and to share about your experience of living as a disciple
- **Contemplate** – a time to pause for worship together
- **Consider** – a time to learn together by exploring Scripture, ‘Wesley’s wisdom’ and other course material
- **Commit** – a time to decide the next steps you personally want to take with God.

To get the best from your group you should:

- **attend regularly**
- **contribute positively**
- **respond willingly.**

Bible quotations

The sessions include some short Bible readings from different versions.

NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
TNIV	Today’s New International Version
NTfE	The New Testament for Everyone, translated by Tom Wright (London: SPCK, 2011)

Do enjoy the take-away!

We hope that you enjoy the group times, but the full benefit of this course comes as you actually begin to USE the spiritual practices between meetings.

Each session ends with a time for you to decide what you would like to take away to try before the group meets again. For example, you might feel that you

would like to try a new way of praying, or reading the Bible – or perhaps even try fasting for the first time.

Session by session you will decide what you want to take away to try to deepen your walk with God. This practical work is a very important part of how you will learn through this course – so do give it a go!

Getting the best from your group

A group feels much safer to explore issues at a deeper level with each other if some ground rules have been agreed before the session starts. Here are some common ones, but feel free to add any further suggestions that are important for your group.

- The group will start and finish on time.
- Everyone is committed to attending each session unless they are ill or are genuinely prevented from attending.
- We will listen to each other, and respect each other when one is speaking.
- We will not talk over each other.
- We will allow space for sharing personal experience and testimony.
- We will watch out for each other and invite others to speak rather than dominate the conversation.
- A judgemental or hostile tone is not acceptable.
- Disagreement and searching questions are acceptable, but these should be expressed with respect.
- Personal information shared within the group is confidential within the group and should not be passed on.

The season of Lent

The sessions in this course can be used at any time of year, but are well-suited to the season of Lent, as we consider how to prepare ourselves to follow Jesus in our daily lives, by using the spiritual practices.

Introducing Lent

Since at least AD330 the Church has prepared for Easter with a season of 40 days of fasting. The season of Lent is understood as a way of remembering and sharing in Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11).

In those 40 days, Jesus' commitment to his Father's will was tested. Was his life really given to serving God alone? Was his Father's word the only word worth listening to and obeying?

Resisting the temptation to settle for an easy life, he embraced the calling that would lead him to the cross. Choosing God's will, Jesus emerged from the wilderness "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14) ready for the years of public ministry that would lead to the events of Easter.

In the same way, as we follow 40 days of fasting in Lent, we reflect on our own calling to be disciples. During Lent, we choose to deny ourselves some kind of material comfort, as a way of heightening and intensifying our pursuit of God and God's will for our lives.

As Lent leads us to Easter, we arrive at the cross, prepared once again to yield our all to Christ, and at the empty tomb joyfully ready to walk on with our Risen Lord.

This course explores the spiritual practices that help us grow in our walk with Jesus. We will look at three practices that feature in the account of Jesus' wilderness testing and two that are central to the events of Easter itself.

- **Prayer** – Immediately before Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness, we read that he was praying. He encountered his Father in a powerful way, and was filled with the Spirit, preparing him for the test to come. (Luke 3:21-22)
- **Fasting** – Jesus ate nothing for the 40 days in the wilderness. His physical needs were neglected in order to sharpen his spiritual strength for the battle that he faced. (Luke 4:1-2)
- **Scripture** – Jesus demonstrated that Scripture shaped his life. Three times he strengthened his resolve to stay faithful to his calling, by stating "it is written". (Luke 4:4, 8, 10)
- **Lord's Supper** – Before his arrest Jesus ate a Passover meal with his disciples. During this traditional Jewish meal, Jesus daringly reinterpreted some of the elements to point to his own life, death, resurrection and return. Ever since, Christians have eaten the bread and wine of Holy Communion as a place where we *remember* – but also *receive* – Christ. (Matthew 26:26-29)
- **Fellowship** – At the last supper, Jesus also established the importance of Christian fellowship by giving his disciples a new commandment: they must love one another as he had loved them – generously; deeply; sacrificially. In fact, the love that they were to show one another was to prove to a watching world that their discipleship was genuine. (John 13:34-35)