

# Wanting and Knowing God: An exploration of spiritual practices

“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord.”

-the LORD

“We all grow up with half a pie, and part of being an adult person of faith is finding the rest of your pie.”

-Shauna Niequist

“It’s not a hill, it’s a mountain, when you start out the climb.”

-Bono

“ Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”

-John Calvin

“Practice makes perfect.”

-John Adams

“I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.”

-Jesus

## A 6 Week Study Dr. Brandi Bingham Kellett

**Individuals and independent small groups are welcome to us this study as a guide as you dig into the Word alone or with others. Any group meeting as part of a church, ministry or non-profit, please contact me before using this curriculum. Any sales or reproduction of this work is prohibited. Dr. Kellett has written over a dozen Bible studies, available upon request. Contact me with questions.**

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## Beginning thoughts:

Many of us have been walking with Christ for a long time. While we cling to Him for salvation and know He is our only hope for a rich, purposeful, present life, many of us struggle to daily *want* Him. We say we want Him, and we do on some level. We certainly know we *need* Him, as our lives are messy and overwhelming and seem to fall short of our expectations. But our lives are also cluttered; we are too busy to think about what's best, so we grab just enough time to think about what works for this moment instead. Over time, what works becomes a habit, and these habits can lead either to angsty anxiety ("This can't be right...why does life feel tense?...I must be doing something wrong.") or to guilty wondering ("Why am I such a poser? I don't do what I know I need to do to experience the meaningful life God promises.") or to purposeless survival ("I don't even feel anything anymore. I just go through the motions and have a pretty low bar for 'abundant' living."). Even though we know you need God, living in that daily vulnerability—the kind of "leading with your need" we saw in Mark, the kind that makes us disrupt your patterns and ask for help—is pretty rare.

And yet, we all have glimpses, right? I would guess each of us has had a moment in the last week where you spontaneously cried out to God for help. Where you felt God respond. Where an honest-to-God moment of weakness or reconciliation allowed you to find freedom from the rules you've made for yourself. Where you forgot to feel guilty or distant or weird and just cried out in joy or pain to your Creator. Those moments, closer than we often remember, are evidence that you are a spiritual being made to need and want God. Be encouraged, for "the longing for something more, no matter how weak or crackling with heat, is evidence that God is already at work in your life. You wouldn't want more of God if the Holy Spirit wasn't first seeking you" (Calhoun).

As we begin to learn about the brilliant practices out there in the Christendom, all available to you as you rediscover, or strengthen, your desire for God and intimate knowledge of His love for you, let's remember first things first: God placed His own image in you, and He loves you deeply for that very reason. Christ's death demonstrates His love, and it completely justifies you to stand before God, un-lazy, un-dirty, un-bored, un-bad-habited, right this second. Right now, God is not rolling His eyes at you. He is thrilled that you are beginning to recognize that you already want Him, that you are more motivated than you think.

Can we also agree from the beginning that God's way of being is really different from our own? If we acknowledge that his value system is not ours then maybe we can avoid trying to muscle our way back into His good graces. You can't alarm clock your way into wanting the love of God alone. Indeed "willpower and discipline *alone* can never fix your soul. Striving, pushing and trying harder will not recover your life. Unforced rhythms of grace depend on something more than self-mastery and self-effort. The simple truth is that *wanting* to keep company with Jesus has a staying power that 'shoulds' and 'oughts' seldom have. Jesus wants us to recognize that hidden in our desperations and desires in an appetite for the Lord and the Giver of life" (Calhoun). These practices aren't portkeys (can I get a little

Potter love?) that magically transport you to intimacy with Jesus. They are simply practices that have proven fruitful for the saints who have gone before us. They have helped other believers create space to seek and find and know and need and want God.

One final thought: in the beautiful economy of God, your desire to want God will fuel your discipline in these spiritual practices, and, importantly, using these spiritual practices will fuel your desire to know God. One is not a starting point; instead, they feed each other, cycles of freedom and desire and knowledge of God. Do not abandon the effort because you think you are entering the roundabout from the wrong street. The important thing is to get into the circle! As Barton writes, "I cannot transform myself, or anyone else for that matter. What I can do is create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place, by developing and maintaining a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep me open and available to God." Don't overthink your motives or past, disqualifying yourself from creating space to want to know God's love. Instead, as Jesus and Nirvana beautifully offer, "Come, as you are."

Brandi

### **The Plan**

<b>Week 1</b>	Spiritual Breathing
<b>Week 2</b>	Meditation, Lectio Divina, Contemplation and Memorization
<b>Week 3</b>	Centering Prayer, Examen, Labrynth, Praying the Hours, and Stations of the Cross
<b>Week 4</b>	Dessert Fathers and Mothers, and Monastic Traditions
<b>Week 5</b>	Sabbath and Rest
<b>Week 6</b>	Mercy, Justice and the Rule of Life

### **Sources:**

*The B-I-B-L-E* ☺

*Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

*The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster

*Sacred Rhythms*, Ruth Haley Barton

The Inter-Web ☺

## **Week 1: Spiritual Breathing**

Breathing comes naturally to all of us: in and out, necessary and forgotten, life giving and overlooked. Hidden in this routine activity is a powerful metaphor for our lives with Christ. We get a glimpse of this when we examine the Trinity. Out of all the elements God could choose to capture His essence, He chooses Spirit. He has given us a great Comforter, whose quality is air-like, whose presence is everywhere and always available. God's provision is very much like our breath. He tells the migrating Israelites He will feed them everyday with manna from heaven. The manna cannot be hoarded, as it spoils by nightfall. God is teaching His nation that their new journey with Him is ongoing, cyclical, and constantly renewed. Like Jesus' reference to daily bread in His model of prayer, we are reminded with our breath that our relationship with the Lord must be constant and ongoing.

### **Observant Breath**

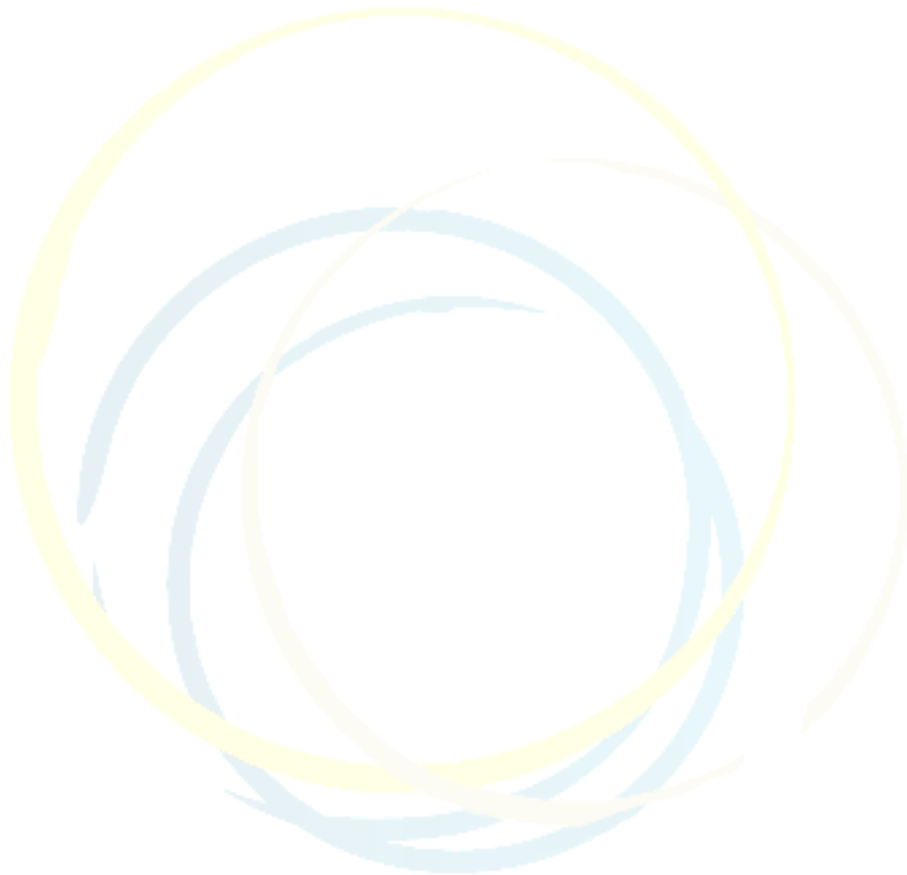
Plant your feet on the floor, roll your shoulders up and then down. Breathe in deeply through your nose and out through your mouth. Do not alter your breathing, but instead just notice it. Allow yourself to be reminded of God's love for you and your need for Him as often as you notice your breath. Let the constant need to breathe remind you that you constantly need Jesus, and that, like the air around you, His Holy Spirit is constantly ministering to you. Push down on your feet as you breathe, feeling the earth beneath you, and be aware that you are grounded in Christ. If your thoughts have strayed from your breath then notice that and then think again about your breath. Be grateful for your lungs as they fill, with your body as it functions. Bring your mind back to the breath. If your mind cannot focus then notice that with grace and forgiveness. There is no need to punish yourself for thoughts that wonder from your breath or for thoughts that wonder from God. As Barton writes, "this being with what is' is not the same as problem solving...it means allowing God to be with me in that place and waiting for him to do what is needed."

### **Mindful Breath**

When you feel yourself tipping toward anxiety or dipping into despair, breathe. Wherever you are, take a deep breath in through your nose to the count of three, hold for a beat, and then exhale through your mouth or nose to the count of three. Focus on counting. Pay attention as your diaphragm lifts and your lungs fill. Notice that your neck and shoulders begin to relax, your pulse slows and you become mindful of the connection between your mind and body. Focus completely on counting your breaths until your pulse, panic and anxiety have stabilized. God has given you everything you need to flourish; His timing is perfect; He will never leave nor forsake you. When your body has oxygen your mind can think most clearly, even as your spirit will discern God's presence more freely when you have stopped to remember him.

### **Confessional Breath**

When you notice a mistake, a sin, a conviction, immediately breathe in forgiveness and breathe out your confession. Breathe in God's love and breathe out your anger. Breathe in God's purity and breathe out your impurity. Breathe in His reconciliation and breathe out your frustration. The cross justified you and the resurrection reconciled you to Him. Allow the immediacy of your breath to make forgiveness and reconciliation real for you in the first moment you stray.



## Week 2: Meditation, Lectio Divina, Contemplation & Memorization

Before and after Christ, God's primary way of revealing Himself to all of humanity was through His Word. In today's world, knowledge is very easy to come by; however, we are missing out on knowing God deeply when we fail to hide His word in our hearts, meditating on it day and night. Scripture is self-justifying in this way, for Godly men and women from Moses to David to Jesus to John to Priscilla to Timothy memorized loads of scripture. We call scripture God's Word for a reason: It is His preferred language, and He loves to speak to His children through it. If you are not *in* the Word and *knowing* the Word then you will miss out on a degree of intimacy with God.

### Contemplation

Contemplation is a practice that prepares you to be present and awake *before* you spend time with God in His word or with other people. At its core, contemplation allows you to be fully present to the physical moment you share with others as well as fully aware that God is also at work. It is a way of seeing that helps you look beyond the present moment and into deeper meanings that might be present, untold stories that might affect an interaction. To begin, pray that God would wake you up to ALL that is happening in any given moment. Pray that you will listen more—to a person or to God's Spirit—taking a beat before you respond. Notice in yourself any reluctance to be fully present without distractions. Contemplatives "believe God may be found and revered if one is prepared to notice how marvelously mysterious and personal life in this world is...they invite us into the moment and tell us to *be*" (Calhoun). Be mindful and aware of God at work as you enter interactions with others or His word, and then develop the habit of reflecting afterward to see what you noticed, and where God might be. In David's Psalms we often see "a kind of knowing that comes in the absence of words or in the stillness of waiting" (Barton). The practice of contemplation allows you to know that the stillness, the practice of being present, is crucial to perceiving God's presence in you.

### Lectio Divina

This term, meaning "sacred reading" in the Latin, is a simple practice whose intention is to encounter Christ through Scripture. Here you have "no other agenda except listening and deepening [your] intimacy with God" (Barton). It is an ancient practice of prayer, reading and contemplation, usually completed in four steps. To begin, pick a passage of Scripture 6-8 verses in length. Start in silence, becoming quiet and fully present as you find your desire to meet with God (be contemplative!). Then:

*Read*-What does the text say at a basic level? What is the context?

*Meditate*-What is God saying to me through the text and what might He be revealing to me? Where do I resonate deeply with a character or a moment in the text? Where do "I find myself resisting, pulling back, wrestling" (Barton)? Notice these responses without judging them!

*Prayer*-How do I want to respond to God based on what I've read? Am I fearful, worried, encouraged, resistant, or thankful? Be honest and take a moment to respond to him.

*Action*-What do I want to do after reading, meditating and responding to God? Do I need to forgive, be courageous, release or approach someone? Am I willing to change?

Finally, after this process (which can be greatly abbreviated if you love this next part more ☺), allow yourself to focus on one phrase or word from the passage. Imagine it, think about it, explore it, meditate on it, and use it to usher you into God's presence throughout your day.

### **Meditation**

In meditation you pause, with presence and love. You can meditate on a person, a sight, a scripture or a moment. Begin by stretching, becoming aware of the mind/body connection and asking God to meet you. Lift your shoulders up and then down, finding a comfortable place to sit or stand. Your body and mind will be less distracted if you prepare them to be still. Next, simply see. Read the words, observe the scene or notice the person. While Eastern meditation often empties the mind, Christians can use meditation to focus all one's energy on Christ, His creation, or His word, expanding Him to be everywhere. As you read or observe, be curious and let questions come. Write those questions down or hold them in your mind. Don't rush. If you get distracted, bring your mind back to connect with what your eyes see. Read the passage again, stopping over a word or phrase that affects you. Why and how are you moved? What do you want to explore further? You do not need to have answers to move on; the process of training yourself to focus will yield greater truth and transformation in time. This is a slow process, and might increase in time as you continue. A good place to start might be the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."

### **Memorization of Scripture**

Plan ahead. Option A: Start with 3 verses. Write them on notecards or put them in your phone. To begin, simply read the verses several times a day. Do not overthink it, but read them often. As you become more familiar with them your spirit will begin to understand them more. Each week add 3 more verses, starting each morning by reading all 6 (9, 12) verses and simply adding the new ones. You will soon find that the early verses are committed to your memory. It usually takes 2-3 weeks to memorize a verse.

Option B: Pick a passage of scripture: either an entire chapter or a section. I suggest Philippians 2, Colossians 1, or Isaiah 61. Begin by reading the entire section, but then only repeat 2 verses throughout that day. On day 2 begin by reading the entire section, but then only repeat the first 3 verses multiple times a day. Add a verse a day. If you find yourself not retaining the early verses then don't add a verse for a day or two. Again, the key is to repeat each verse you have learned each day (not to memorize in chunks and then put them together).

## **Week 3: Centering Prayer, Examen, Labyrinth, & Stations of the Cross**

Prayer is a catch-all word for all the ways we try to commune with God. We have all had moments of desperation where we cry out to God; I am guessing we have all also had moments where we try to pray and get distracted and bored in about .2 seconds. There are 100s of catchy ideas on how to make your prayer life meaningful, and I think we like them because we all know prayer matters! Before we begin, let's remind ourselves that God is not shaming us for poor prayer performance; rather, He "draws near to those who draw near to Him" (James 4:8). For this study I am offering 5 traditions that have been fruitful, used both corporately and independently. There is no perfect way to approach God; however, I have found my focus and desire to pray renewed by using the following practices.

### **Centering Prayer**

The goal of centering prayer is not to find enlightenment or peace, but to seek God (who is, in fact, the fulfillment of those things ☺) by quieting your scattered thoughts in the still center of Christ's presence. Before you begin, find a prayer word on which you will focus. Common words are Jesus, healer, Father, love, and presence. When ready, use your mind/body connection to truly settle in (stretch, breathe, settle). Become aware of waiting before the Lord in openness (contemplation). Gaze on Christ, uttering or thinking on your word, as you see Him or feel Him in your core. When you notice distractions, focus on Christ by using your word. Release thoughts to God and return to Christ's presence within you. If you know scripture you can say a verse. This is not a time for questioning, pleading, asking; it is rather a time to heighten your awareness that you are unified with Christ, outside of outcomes, in your very core.

### **Labyrinth**

The concept of the labyrinth involves a pilgrimage for a purpose. The idea is to actually follow a marked path, engaging all your senses in each step you take rather than in arriving at your destination. The typical labyrinth can be found near a church, and consists of stones laid out in a circular pattern, spiraling toward a center. As you move toward the center, pray with each step that you can leave the distractions of the world behind, focusing instead on your center as Christ. Some have different shapes so that at points in your journey you are actually further from the center. Isn't that just like walking with Christ?! Our walk with him is not linear, but comes and goes, back and forth. As you walk this pattern give yourself grace for the rambling path you experience with Christ and others. There is no failure in following your own path! Also be aware of the connection between your mind and body as you walk: allow the physical journey you take, step after step on a path you did not design, to speak to your spiritual journey. After reaching the center, pausing to contemplate your connection and fulfillment with Christ, turn your attention toward reengaging the world you left behind. Walk back toward your life, knowing that your awareness in Christ might come in cycles, that you are in a process of



growth, and that no one moment will define you forever. Sanctification takes time, and you are more like Him as you move.

In Nashville:

215 Leonard Ave 37025 (dirt; email Alix first [aiwa63@gmail.com](mailto:aiwa63@gmail.com))

900 Glendale Ln 37204 (grass; Glendale United Methodist; always open)

419 Woodland St 37206 (pepples; St. Ann's Episcopal; always open)

1008 19<sup>th</sup> Aves S 37212 (grass; Scarritt-Bennett Center; open daylight hours)

## **Examen**

The practice of Examen (also known as the examination of consciousness) trains you to intentionally build moments of reflection into your day. *This is a spiritual practice because the art of self-reflection is pivotal to the desire to know God.* Spiritual self-reflection leads to conviction of sin, awareness of giftedness, exposure of bad habits, confidence in God's provision, and many other benefits. Examen allows you to live with more awareness of your ability to ignore the gifts of God as you focus on despair or busyness, or to seek out God's blessing with gratitude and joy as you find ways to love others well. Examen helps you discern God's voice in your life and discover areas of struggle and giftedness as you begin to notice God moving throughout your day. Examen allows you to *see* a struggle or misstep, to *name* your mistake as an expression of what is going on inside you, and to *confess* that sin to God, asking Him to strip you of your selfishness. To engage in examen, simply set aside time every day to reflect on two questions. As you do, your answers will begin to reveal for you certain habits, struggles, joys, or areas of gratitude that should be dominant themes in your life. As you ask yourself two sides of the same question, day after day, do not over analyze your answers; rather, make a note and take in the data you collect. You might be most impacted after a week or two when you begin to notice patterns—not of situations, but of *your responses to and feelings about such moments.*

Possible questions include:

For what moment am I most grateful today? For what moment am I least grateful?

When did I give/receive the most love today? When did I give/receive the least?

What was the most life-giving moment today? What was the most life-thwarting?

When did I feel most connected to God, others, self? When was I unconnected?

When did I experience "consolation"? When did I experience "desolation"?

When did I most embody the fruits of the spirit? When did I least embody them?

Along with the pair of questions you choose to use, remember to not just name the moment, but to *examine how you felt* in that moment. As you notice a feeling or thought that repeats itself, think about how those feelings bring you closer to God or push you away. This practice, in time, can reveal much to you about the words you unintentionally whisper to yourself: what truths bring you consolation in Christ and what lies lead you to despair?

### **Praying the Hours (Liturgy of the Hours, or Divine Office)**

This is simply the practice of praying at fixed hours. I find it helpful because it allows you to find continuity through your day, no matter your activity or demands. You simply take a few moments to connect with the Divine, and often find your refocus strengthened by your knowledge that millions of believers have stopped to pray similar prayers at the same hours for millennia. In fact, this tradition was first and still is pursued by Jews and Muslims with their own Holy Scriptures as well! You are welcome to your own prayers, but I find great belonging in praying the specific prayers called the Divine Office. Most offices contain prayers, a hymn, psalms and other verses. Simply stop, find your breath, let go of that which distracts or upsets you, and reconnect with God's spirit in you. Phyllis Tickle has a wonderful manual called *The Divine Hours*, which gives specific prayers to pray morning (between 6-9 am), midday (11-2 pm), and evening (5-8 pm). Setting your phone timer to stop 3 times a day to complete the Divine Office, to read a passage of Scripture, to say the verses you are memorizing, or to practice centering prayer can reorient your day in powerful ways. You can access the prayers at [explorefaith.org](http://explorefaith.org) or [divineoffice.org](http://divineoffice.org)

### **Stations of the Cross**

Traditionally a Lenten exercise, this practice encourages you to slow down and ponder the last moments of Jesus' life. Because I think diving deeply into each of Christ's moments as he approached His sacrificial death is always fruitful, I decided to include it here. There are many versions of stations, from 5 to 15. The best practice of this that I have seen occurs in the gorgeous old cathedrals of Europe, where stained glass artisans tell the story of Christ's slow, rich, intentional death. Parishioners can walk the stations, stopping before each image of love, sadness, anguish, strength, assuredness, or surrender. I suggest you find images of possible stations. Find a place to sit or stroll every day for the 5-15 days you want to lean into the Stations of the Cross, and then go there. Spend intentional time each day contemplating one moment or interaction of Christ's last 4 days on earth, and revel in the depth of intimacy that you feel with Christ.

## **Week 4: Desert Fathers and Mothers & Monastic Traditions**

In the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, several monks, hermits and ascetics moved to the desert in order to find a pure way to worship God without distraction. Most lived in the Scetes desert of Egypt, and their collective writings are preserved in *Apophthegmata Patrum* (*Sayings of the Desert Father*). One of the earliest, and most famous fathers, is Anthony the Great, and he is known as the Father of Christian monasticism. He heard a sermon stating that the best way to follow Christ is to follow His charge to the rich, young ruler: Sell your possessions, give them to the poor and follow Christ. Many devout people, convinced that society was inherently corrupt, followed Anthony, withdrawing from society, selling all possessions, and moving away to live alone or in small groups. They rejected all indulgences, and focused on fasting, prayer, the singing of psalms, and training their thoughts and desires on God alone. Most monastic traditions either began in these desert communities or were organized around the sayings attributed to them. Below you can read about the different monastic traditions, asking the Lord if any of these traditions could offer you a path forward into intimacy with the Lord. While few of us will actually join a monastery or commit ourselves solely to the service of the church, monastic traditions have challenged me to consider how my life might change if I were to devote myself to exploring one discipline over the long haul. I would also recommend reading the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers!*

Here are the primary practices of all monastic traditions, as explored by the Desert Father and Mothers:

### **Withdrawal**

Desert Fathers and Mothers fundamentally believed that culture at large was corrupt and offensive to God. In order to devote themselves to God, they believed they had to create space between themselves and the world (and the patterns of the world) that they left behind. Although total abandonment is not something I recommend (☺), how might your perspective be improved by building some space into your life? How might your values and behaviors flow directly out of Christ's work in your life if you create some distance between your own heart and commitments and the loud voices of society?

### **Compassion**

The Desert Fathers and Mothers emphasized living like Christ, in line with Christ, as an extension of Christ, more than studying theology. They wanted to create an environment closest to a Gospel way of life as possible. Caring well for each other, sacrificing your own agenda, forgiving fully, and emphasizing care for others more than your plan (even a "plan" for God) is all important to them. These ideas, rather than productivity or achievement, were their only goals for each day.

## **Scripture**

Desert Fathers and Mothers believed hearing scripture with others and reading it alone is the path to contemplating God more deeply. They found ways to emphasize and hear scripture all day, repeating verses while at work, and meditating on scripture throughout the day through praying the hours.

## **Prayer**

Silence and stillness (referred to as “Hesychasm”) were very important to the Desert Father and Mothers. They often approached prayer as a meditative silence. Close your eyes, empty your mind of everything, and repeat a simple prayer of need to God continuously. The Jesus Prayer was often used (“Lord Jesus, have mercy, on me, a sinner”). Inner and outer stillness can lead to outward productivity and inner stillness, and, in the process, knowing God always. This is often called Practicing the Presence of God. They believed knew that living continuously aligned with Christ happened best when it was intentionally “practiced.”

Here are the primary monastic traditions and their founders (my italics emphasize their primary legacies):

### **Saint Pachomius (292-348 AD; Coptic Monasticism)**

Pachomius had been a Roman soldier, and his tradition was regimented around fasting, long periods of prayer, silence, obedience and discipline. Each member submitted themselves to strong male and female leadership (abba and amma) and the community prayed and read scripture together and alone every day. All property was held communally, freeing the members to work hard at communal tasks and to care for each other's needs only. *Coptics are known for submission, simplicity and humility, and I find them helpful because they remind me that submission is the way of Christ.*

### **Saint Benedict (480-550 AD; Rule of St. Benedict)**

Benedictine monks submit themselves under the authority of an abbot, and Benedict is often considered the father of western monasticism. Although he did not establish an Order, the “Rule of Saint Benedict” is well known as “pax, ora et labora” (peace, pray and work). Compared to other traditions, the *Rule offers a place for individuality in the midst of institutionalism. They are committed to living well in relationship with each other, renouncing your own will, and committing oneself to an ascetic lifestyle in order to better know God. Their day has regular periods of prayer, sleep, work and scripture (all done both communally and privately).* There are eight “hours”: they met for prayer or scripture at midnight, 3am, 6am, noon, 3pm, 6pm and 9pm. For me, the idea of “a Rule” is helpful in that it requires me to think about how I might live consistently, focusing on God with my heart AND my actions.

### **Saint Ignatius (1491-1556 AD; Jesuit Order)**

Ignatius was committed most to missions and is the patron saint of spiritual retreats. He published a book called *Spiritual Exercises* designed to offer disciplines to follow for a month. He founded the Jesuit Order in order to send missionaries around Europe to create educational institutions (secondary schools, colleges, and seminaries). His legacy, and the monks, priests and nuns of the Order, remind us that *God delights in our pursuit of knowledge and truth, and that faith is made stronger through intellectual pursuits*. The Jesuit order emphasizes discipline, self-denial and total obedience to the Pope and other religious superiors.

### **Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226 AD; Franciscan Order)**

Born in Assisi, Francis was very wealthy. He possessed lavish tastes (and indulged them!) while simultaneously having consistent compassion for the poor (whom he once referred to as his “wife of surpassing fairness”). He suffered a few illnesses, and wrath from his wealthy-merchant father (he was disinherited when he committed himself to caring for the Church and the poor), which God used to change his heart. His community was built around the idea that all believers must abandon their worldly possessions and live for Christ alone. Indeed, Francis even downplayed theology, believing that book-learning could stifle the centrality of prayer and the simplicity of a Gospel way of life. Franciscan communities emphasize the care of creation above all else. *Included in this are beliefs in the dignity of all people (as God’s image bearers), the belief that ALL life is sacred and must therefore be valued (caring for the poor, animals and the environment), and that followers must actively pursue peace, reconciliation and justice.* (Yep, he’s my fave!)

### **Saint Augustus (354-430 AD; Augustinian Order)**

Augustus committed his life to the service of Christ as an adult, and although he established monastic communities everywhere he lived, his faith commitments required that he live fully engaged in the world even as he took refuge outside the world. He fundamentally believed that the spiritual realm was different from and more important than the physical realm. He wrote prolifically, but is best known for his *Confessions*, which serves as a model for living honestly, aware of one’s own sin. He also believed in the importance of and unity of the body and the soul. *Augustine’s ideal is to unite people in the communion of mind and heart for God’s glory and service to his people (unity, truth and charity). Emphasis is placed on loyalty and trust within a community committed to a deep interior life, sharing all possessions and serving others with a “single heart.”*

## Week 5: Sabbath & Rest

In the bizarrely wonderful economy of God, rest is paramount to knowing and pleasing God. First, as our Father and the model we follow, God rested as part of the original creative process. Next, he instructed humanity to follow a rhythm of long stretches of work and short stretches of rest. David, whose heart yearned deeply for God, and who experienced deep intimacy with God, envisioned a God who called him “lie down in green pastures...beside still waters” (Psalm 23). Finally, Jesus himself reminds weary people to come to Him so that He can give them rest. Even in His pattern of ministry He built in times of being alone together for all of His disciples. In short, contrary to the primacy of productivity in Western thinking (or efficiency in Brandi-thinking ☺), God calls us to a different path, where rest and Sabbath are disciplines that require space and intentionality.

### Rest

Sometimes rest is simply the absence of work, while at others it is the thoughtful pursuit of a life-giving activity. In order to allow God to redefine rest, and your pursuit of it, you might consider the following:

*Hear yourself:* Deep down, when you aren't controlling your thoughts or saying what you “should” believe, what do you think about rest? Is it a healthy and life-giving activity? Is it shameful and indulgent (even though you do it)? Is it something you demand and deserve? Is it for weak people? Bring these inherent thoughts to God and allow scripture to correct them.

*Feel Yourself:* Godly rest demands your attention to the mind-body connection God placed inside you. You are not just a will, detached from bodily limits and realities. Your body is not just carnal, needing to be whipped into shape. Instead, you were created, body and soul, and listening to your body can teach you a great deal about the condition of your soul. Do you sleep well? Wake up refreshed? Live with frequent headaches? Have moments in the day with no energy at all? Have chronic pain? Invite God into a conversation about those observations. First, notice your physical reality. Second, acknowledge your physical body might be revealing something about your life and heart. Third, ask God to help you notice and correct places of dis-ease.

*See yourself:* As you grow in the practice of disciplines, particularly of examen, allow yourself to notice when you feel drained and when you feel encouraged. What saps your energy and what gives you life? Instead of trying to craft “perfect rest”, look back over your week and discover what already made you feel rested. Ask God to usher you into rest and to teach you about the process.

## **Sabbath**

We must bring the same level of consciousness to our practice of the Sabbath. It is helpful to think about what Sabbath is and what Sabbath isn't.

Sabbath is NOT:

Keeping Sabbath is not indulgent or lazy.

Keeping Sabbath is not a way for you to implement selfish control over your family or time.

Keeping Sabbath is not impossible 😊

Keeping Sabbath is not about you using a trump card of "alone time" or "boundaries".

Sabbath IS:

Keeping Sabbath is a way to recognize God's best for you. Sabbath is about recognizing God created and expects you to implement a Sabbath rhythm to your life. This means you have to choose to say no when you 'should' say yes, and choose to rest when you 'need' to work. It is about intentionally putting your work and relational value in God's hands.

Keeping Sabbath is about recognizing you are a child of God, not just a soldier of God. This means you develop tenderness for yourself and consider what would feel restorative and kind to your soul and body. Discover spaces that physically restore you, spaces that make you feel connected, content and comfortable (literally, create a cozy space that feels indulgent to your body and use it during Sabbath!). In the same way that children have no notion of time, Sabbath ushers you into a timeless space where you can connect your body with your soul with no schedule.

Keeping Sabbath is about recognizing you have limits and need your Creator to sustain you. This means you humbly recognize you have needs in order to be your best, and that hard work and preparation are not the only things of value in God's economy.

Keeping Sabbath is about recognizing you were called to be intimate with God alone AND in community. This means you think about who gives you life and helps restore you. Explore life-giving ways to share Sabbath with such people. Perhaps you meet for dinner, maybe you share a blanket in a park, or hike or bike together. Perhaps it would feel fabulous to share a kitchen and prepare a favorite meal together! Sabbath is not only about withdrawal, but also about engaging others in restorative relationships.

## Week 6: Mercy, Justice & the Rule of Life

Mercy and Justice can feel like a strange fit for a study on spiritual disciplines. And yet, when approached in a healthy way, our pursuit of a mercy-fueled justice can reflect and bring about our deep connection to our Creator.

### Mercy and Justice

In thinking about mercy and justice, we must remember that God's approach to us is foundationally merciful. Always. He sees us as we might one day be; He looks upon us as if we are valuable and worthy; He never loses sight of who we are because of what we have done. If we are to know Jesus deeply, we must develop the discipline of instinctive mercy.

### Mercy

The discipline of mercy comes naturally to some, but that does not mean it is not God's best for us all. God has called us his ambassadors in the world, extensions of his very hands and feet and heart. *Incarnating* Christ in the world is indeed the greatest reflection I know of the *intimacy* I share with Christ. Along with most disciplines, the practices of examen and contemplation can be illuminating here. Notice the way you think about and treat others: are there people you judge instinctively, leaning back and shaking your head at them (even just in your heart?). Are there others who always get a free pass from you, whose intentions are imagined in the best of lights? Focus your thoughts on a friend with whom you struggle to show mercy. Remind yourself that you have a great capacity for mercy in the right circumstances. Remind yourself that God has empowered you to be like Him in the world. Ask him to replace your judgment with curiosity, to replace your skepticism with active love. To expand your "us." Repeat these phrases like a mantra if that is helpful. This will lead you to mercy.

### Justice

God's approach to humanity is a pursuit of justice. He sought to implement justice throughout the people of Israel. God elevated orphans, shepherd boys, prostitutes, slaves, servants and sinners to be the leaders of His people. When Isaiah prophesied about the coming Messiah, His primary purpose was to *fulfill* justice, both for prisoners and captives and oppressed and poor people, and to *become* justice so that we could approach and know God. In his life, Jesus went on to care for those marginalized by society. *In short, you cannot pursue intimacy with God without also actively engaging in justice.*

The spiritual discipline of justice requires the following steps:

*Inform yourself:* Do you know about injustice occurring in your city? Educate yourself about how power works, and who wields it. Remind yourself that God's economy has no room for worldly approaches to consuming power.

*Align yourself:* Are you pursuing vulnerable people? Examine your friendships, and confess any propensity you have shown toward living for your own comfort (even in who you pursue). Make active choices to actually know people who have been



pushed to the margins of society, who suffer from systems that oppress and harm them.

*Sacrifice yourself:* Explore your own privilege, talent, access and power, and consider how you might use them to pursue justice for others. Learn about the godly disciplines of protest and lament, and consider how you might participate in them for yourself and others.

*Invite God into this conversation:* Are you convinced that intimacy with Christ means intimacy with the people He constantly pursued and advocated for? He is the God who aligns Himself with broken people, and you cannot know the fullness of God without also knowing and actively loving people without power.

### **Rule of Life**

As we end this study of spiritual disciplines, it is important for you to decide which disciplines you will implement in your own life. Which “rules” will you adhere to? What will you faithfully practice? The idea of “Rule of Life” encompasses two ideas:

- 1) The “Rule of Life” is your own personal collection of spiritual practices that create space for you to know and walk with God. Barton says it provides “the structure that enables you to say yes to the process of spiritual discipline day in and day out. [It helps you ask] *How do I want to live so I can be who I want to be?*” What are the rhythms you are developing to pursue a relationship with God?
- 2) The “Rule of Life” is a centering thought or a prayerful mantra that encapsulates who you want to be and how you want to live. This practice began with St Benedict, and it is both an acknowledgement of patterns and a focusing phrase that brings your thoughts, mind, soul, strength, prayer and energy back to who you were made to be. It might be helpful for you to think of Rule of Life as a more fully embodied life verse. As you develop your own Rule of Life, allow yourself to both adhere to patterns (disciplines) that keep you in touch with Jesus, and to help give language to the deepest prayer of your heart for how you want to live. Use this phrase often, making it a prayer of your breath, and soon you will find yourself embodying your prayer as you walk more closely with God.