

5 SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR BUSY GRADUATE STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Many of us are busy people who are often running from one responsibility to another. It's no different for graduate students who need discipline and order to succeed in academics and life. My years working toward two graduate degrees while raising three children, ministering full-time at church, and managing a severe chronic illness stretched the limits of my physical stamina and spiritual resilience.

In the busiest and most challenging times I needed more of God, not more time to accomplish tasks. Spiritual disciplines have provided the rhythms and space for me to stay connected to God as a branch is to a vine (John 15:6). According to Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, centuries of connection exist between discipline and desire. She writes, "From its beginnings the church linked the desire for more of God to intentional practices, relationships and experiences that gave people space in their lives to 'keep company with Jesus.'"²

Dallas Willard emphasizes engaging in spiritual disciplines as a means "to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom."³ His writings helped lead me to explore different ways to practice my faith that fit my life context and focused me back on God and His mission.

The following are five spiritual practices that I've integrated into my busy schedule. They help to center our lives back on Jesus while transforming us into His likeness. While each of the practices can be engaged individually, also doing so in pairs or in a small group brings the added benefit of growing together with others.

With intentionality and attention, practices like these can become a way to bring Jesus into the center of everything you do. Each practice can be the focus over an academic term where one is introduced and practiced over a month. Touching base at the end of the month reinforces learning and habits that can be built for a lifetime of walking with God.

¹ Adapted from Dan Stringer, "Five Contemplative Prayer Practices for Busy Students," 2018.

² Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 19.

³ Dallas Willard. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), 156.

BREATH PRAYER

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

My speech therapist surprised me when he said I didn't know how to breathe. I figured I wouldn't be alive if I didn't know how. He meant that I needed to learn to breathe from my diaphragm and slow down to give my voice full support. Analogously it wasn't that I didn't know how to pray. Rather, I needed to relearn how to pray in a way that fit into the natural rhythm of my life. Breath prayer became a vital way to connect me to God and pray continually.

Phileena Heuertz introduces this spiritual practice: "Breath prayer is an ancient Christian prayer practice dating back to at least the sixth century. . . . Early practitioners would repeat to the rhythm of their breath the phrase, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' In time, the prayer was shortened to, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy' or simply, 'Jesus, mercy.'"⁴

The breath prayer itself is simple to do. Calhoun instructs, "Deeply breathe in, repeating any name of God that is dear to you. . . . As you exhale, voice a deep desire of your heart. . . . The brevity of the prayer allows it to be repeated over and over throughout the day."⁵

In breath prayer I recognize that it is ultimately in God that "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28a, NIV). As I pray I'm mindful of how each breath sustains my life and is a gift from God. Choose a breath prayer for the day and come back to it throughout busy moments to remind you of God's presence and sustaining power.

Examples of breath prayers:

- Breathe in: "Lord Jesus," breathe out: "have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13, 18:39)
- Breathe in: "Good Shepherd," breathe out: "lead me by still waters." (Psalm 23:1-2)
- Breathe in: "God of Salvation," breath out: "here I am, send me" (Isaiah 6:8)

A breath prayer I will practice this week: _____.

⁴ Phleena Heuertz. *Mindful Silence: The Heart of Christian Contemplation*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 50.

⁵ Calhoun, 232.

PRAYER WALKING

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior . . . (1 Timothy 2:1-3)

Ever since I could walk I loved to run. Cross country and mile track races in high school introduced me to long runs. Being out on trails gave me an opportunity to appreciate God's Creation in nature and pray. Now, with an arthritic knee, I take long walks. Slowing down allows me to pay attention to my surroundings. I'm not as anxious about catching my breath or keeping up my pace. Prayer walking adds a layer of intentionality where I pray for the places I encounter as I go.

Busyness can feel like running from one thing to the next. Without noticing what's going on around us we miss out on participating in God's work where we are. I led a prayer walk with graduate students at the University of California, Davis and asked them to slowly walk while they prayed for the places they encountered. Afterwards one student shared how they rarely notice the needs around them during the workday. In prayer walking they saw anxious students studying for exams and prayed for their mental health. Another prayed that students would belong to communities, especially after the isolation that resulted from the pandemic.

"Prayer walking draws us out of prayers that are limited to our immediate concerns and into a larger circle of God's loving attention. It can offer a way for listening more deeply to God, to what his concerns for a particular place might be," Calhoun writes. "When we do a prayer walk through a place, we pray for what happens there and seek to recognize God's presence there. This helps us to see the heart of God for that place."⁶

Choose a place to prayer walk. Amid a busy day you can prayer walk in transit to meetings or buildings. During lunch you can pray for your school campus, job site, public gathering space, or neighborhood. Listen as you go to the needs and concerns of those places. If you're not sure how to pray, pray for

- The people who regularly utilize that space
- The ideas that are taught or discussed there
- The institutional structures and systems influencing it

Where I will prayer walk this week: _____.

If you prayer walk with a group, gather afterwards to share your experience. For a campus prayer walk guide click [here](#).

⁶ Calhoun, 284.

BIBLE MEMORIZATION

*I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you.* (Psalm 119:11)

I first started memorizing Bible verses in college. I took a verse from the Sunday sermon or the weekly Bible study to run through my mind as I biked to class or exercised. Three times a week I went to the dermatology clinic for skin treatments, which became opportunities to recite and meditate on Scripture. As I saw God use those words in my heart to encourage me during dark times, I felt motivated to learn more.

James' letter stood out to me when I struggled with chronic health issues: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-3, NIV).

Memorizing verses like those in James allowed me to meditate on Scripture from the heart. I found I could do it anywhere if I had a few moments to focus. God used those words to form resilience in me as I moved from recitation to thoughtful meditation: God, the inflammation that covers much of my skin is testing my faith and patience. Do these words really make sense, that trials are something joyful? How does perseverance lead to maturity? Deeper truth and experience with God emerged from wrestling with memorized Scripture in this way.

Willard writes about the importance of this spiritual practice: "Through memorization, God's words reside in our body, in our social environment, in the constant orientation of our will, and in the depths of our soul. They become a power, a substance, that sustains and directs us without our even thinking of them, and they emerge into conscious thought and action as needed."⁷

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- Choose a Bible verse or passage that stands out to you as you go through the week. Write it down on a card, post-it, or on your phone notes app.
 - Repeat the verse as you go about your day: during exercise, preparing for the day, grocery shopping, etc. Meditate on the words and listen to what God is saying to you through them.
 - Commit to memorize verses with a friend or small group. Practice reciting them together and share your thoughts and reflections with one another.

A verse to memorize this week: _____.

⁷ Willard. "Foreward: Scripture by Heart." <https://dwillard.org/articles/foreword-scripture-by-heart>. Last accessed July 23, 2023.

SILENCE

"Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

The practice of silence feels foreign in today's world. We clamor to be heard through social media channels or to stand out in academic cohorts. With Bluetooth speakers, AirPods, and noise cancelling headphones we can fill the void with noise, effectively distracting ourselves from our own thoughts. I find myself inexorably drawn to the noise when I have a million things to do and not enough time to do even a few.

Henri Nouwen, in *The Way of the Heart*, prophetically wrote about the noise that drowns out our worries and fears. He declares, "One of our main problems is that in this chatty society, silence has become a very fearful thing. For most people, silence creates itchiness and nervousness."⁸ If society was chatty when Nouwen wrote in the 1980s, I wonder what he would think about the proliferation of words in the information age.

I've discovered, however, that the noisier my world the more I need silence. It's in the silence where I identify the thoughts bouncing around my mind I don't otherwise notice. I also address deeper motivations, negative coping methods, and underlying anxieties. In the frenetic pace of life, silence is "a regenerative practice of attending and listening to God in quiet, without interruption and noise. . . . Silence challenges our cultural addiction to amusement, words, music, advertising, noise, alarms and voices."⁹

As a minister I often led the congregation in short times of silence to get a taste of this spiritual practice. Even five minutes of silence, where there is no speaking and only ambient background noise, can feel isolating and unnerving. However, those few moments of silence provided an opportunity to hear God's small whisper as Elijah did on the mountain (1 Kings 19:11-13).

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- Set aside a few minutes where you refrain from speaking and turn off electronics and other sounds.
 - Choose a time and place to practice silence. It can be after a meal, while commuting, on a walk, while doing chores, or preparing for bed.
 - Identify thoughts and distractions that enter your mind.
 - Listen to God. Be present with him. If you keep a journal write a few observations from each of your times of silence and prayerfully review them later.

Time and place I will practice silence this week: _____.

⁸ Henri Nouwen. *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 14.

⁹ Calhoun, 121-2.

WAITING

If we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8:25)

I took a seminary course from a psychology professor, Dr. Archibald Hart, on the minister's personal growth. Type A personalities, he said in one lecture, are driven by achievement and competitiveness. They find delays and waiting unbearable, can be easily angered, and have a low tolerance for frustration and waiting. I looked around wondering if he aimed his instruction directly at me.

Our fast-paced society, where information is readily available in the palm of our hands, conditions us to expect gratification immediately. Not everything in life, though, happens as quickly or efficiently as we would sometimes like. It takes time to heal from injury or to know how well a treatment is working. I might not hear back from a job or school application as soon as I expect. Reconciliation in a broken relationship is not solely in my control or timing.

Patience is a fruit of the Spirit that is cultivated by practicing God's presence moment by moment. Doing so in frustrating circumstances attunes us to God's timing and releases control to him. Each day provides us plenty of opportunities to learn to wait while facing the inevitable frustrations of life with faith and confidence.

Dr. Hart suggested increasing "frustration tolerance" by choosing situations where you must wait. Some ideas include driving in the slow lane, standing in the longer line, taking a more scenic route, eating more slowly, or listening attentively before responding to someone in conversation.

In a Bible meditation I thought about the patriarch Joseph. He helps the chief cupbearer get out of prison, only asking that he remember Joseph. Sadly, two years pass before the cupbearer mentions Joseph's plight to Pharaoh (Genesis 40:23-41:1). Thirteen years pass from the time he is thrown into a cistern by his brothers until he is elevated by Pharaoh. His active waiting on God formed his character and prepared him to serve.

While you are waiting, practice letting go of your need for control. Notice what comes up when you wait and talk to God about it. Ask him to give you a patient heart that actively and expectantly looks to him for resolution. Accept his way and will.

- My usual response to a frustrating circumstance: _____.
- Something currently difficult to wait for: _____.
- One way I can grow my frustration tolerance this week: _____.