



Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

07

The Youth Worker's
Relationship with God

Youth Ministry Training
Lesson Seven: The Youth Worker's Relationship with God

Lesson Introduction

Session Overview

- A Centered Life
- Transforming Practices
- Cultivating a Reflective, Contemplative Spirit
- Creating Space for Discernment
- Life as Prayer

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session you should:

- Be motivated to practice youth ministry from a healthy, personal, spiritual center
- Reflect on their faith journey and create space for centering their life in spiritual discipline
- Demonstrate various discernment processes for health and wholeness

Introduction

This session explores how spiritual practices shape and nurture our faith journey and help us lead others in more holistic ways. We will explore how reflection, contemplation and prayer give way for the gift of discernment to take shape in our personal and professional life.

Lesson Body

A Centered Life of Spiritual Discipline

In the fifth chapter of the letter to the Galatians, the writer implores God's people to be made in God's holiness by guarding their hearts and minds against the ways of the world and by learning to live in the freedom of the Holy Spirit. This is such a striking passage because it calls us to be awake and aware of harmful living, and to choose instead kingdom living which brings freedom. As youth workers, we share in the sacred responsibility of guiding young people to an understanding of what it means to live kingdom lives in this world. If we are going to guide others in this way then we will need to understand what it means to live authentic lives before God that enables us to be led by the Holy Spirit. Apart from the ways we learn this in community, we also learn this through the spiritual disciplines that regularly connect us to God and nurture our faith.

Consider the fact that there is an external and internal side to our faith. The external side includes the things we do, our outward behavior as a result of serving God. The internal side includes the relationship we develop with Christ and the character shaping qualities we gain as a result of being transformed. For various reasons Christians tend to emphasize outward behavior. The danger of focusing on our actions without paying attention to the inner life is that we can perform without being transformed in our hearts and minds. We can choose to do things and we

can be involved in ministry without being led by the Spirit. However, when we are led by the Holy Spirit we enter a process where we are ever-learning new ways of being, new ways of seeing, and new ways of being with others. Careful balance of doing and being requires a life centered on spiritual discipline where reflection and discernment becomes a guiding tool for our own lives and the lives of those around us. Especially in our ministry roles, part of our commitment to others requires that we commit to develop an authentic relationship with God.

In many cultures, there is a growing expectation for immediate results which makes it difficult for us to slow down, to rest and to nurture our faith journeys. This growing demand for immediate results sometimes finds its way into the church and impacts the way we worship or the ways we expect to grow and stretch our faith. However, spiritual growth involves a life-long process and so comes steadily. The ability to recognize the various ways God is continually speaking to us takes practice.

Transforming Practices

The term “spiritual disciplines” defines those practices we engage in that help us create rhythms for sustaining a life of continually seeking and returning to God with our whole lives. Our minds, hearts, bodies, relationships and time are continually offered to God. Participating in spiritual disciplines brings deeper meaning to our lives because we are forced to examine what we really believe and thus, what we do as a result of that belief. They also help us create balance in our spiritual journey by focusing on various dimensions of being Christian in this world. As one pastor explained it to me, “We form habits so that habits can form us.”

Depending on your context or your personality, the word “discipline” may be troubling. Discipline can imply a sense of perfecting a given task. For this reason, it may be more practical to see the spiritual disciplines as practices we participate in, especially when we understand that we may never be fully perfect in our practice of them. In other words, it is not how well we are able to pray, fast or sit in silence. Rather, God encounters us in those moments and they shape and form our character and daily actions. When we learn to be in the presence of God we are better able to offer this presence to others, even and maybe especially in the midst of difficult pain or pressing social issues. It is a very Wesleyan concept after all, that as Christians “we participate in the means of grace in order to become a means of grace in the lives of others.”

The spiritual disciplines open us to God’s interpretation of our lives. However, we will not be able to recognize God’s voice if we do not develop the ability to adequately quiet ourselves, listen and reflect through the various disciplines. Left to our own devices, we often choose those disciplines that we are most familiar with or those that are comfortable for us to practice. We must learn to grow and challenge ourselves if our practices are limited. We miss out on allowing God to bring transformation to our lives in all ways possible.

The Five Categories of Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual Disciplines are those practices and disciplines that call us to and help us live into our relationship with God and neighbors. We can put the spiritual disciplines into five categories that help us remain balanced:

- Word-Oriented Practices (Prayer, Scripture, and Spiritual Reading)
- Sacramental Oriented Practices. These practices are world-embracing practices that help ground us in our bodily realities. (Baptism, The Lord's Supper, Art, Icons, Film, Marriage & Family, Academic Study, Nature, and Athletics)
- Ascetic Practices. These practices are world-denying rather than world-affirming. These practices warn us from getting caught or trapped by anything that is not from God. These are sacrificial practices that keep in mind the greatest commandments—to love God and neighbor. (Tithing, Fasting, Living Simply, Sabbath/Rest, Marriage and Parenting, Celibacy, Exercising, Studying, and Writing)
- Connecting Practices. The ways we connect to others. (Spiritual Friendship, Spiritual Direction/Mentoring, Small Groups, Corporate Worship, Ecumenism, and Being In Creation and so, in nature we become witnesses to an earth that cries out for reconciliation with God.)
- Serving Practices (Almsgiving/Hospitality, Social Justice, Evangelism, Building Up The Body Of Christ, and Caring For Creation.)

When organized in this manner it is evident that the spiritual disciplines serve many purposes. Since these categories reflect five character-shaping qualities that reflect who we are called to be.

Cultivating a Reflective, Contemplative Spirit

A life of reflection and contemplation is an invitation to the process of wholeness. Jeremiah 29:11, is a beautiful passage rich in meaning but perhaps one of the most often misinterpreted passages of our time. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” The literal meaning here is God knows the plans that He is continuously in the process of making, and they are plans to give His people shalom! To wish shalom on someone means to wish them peace, but it also means to wish them wholeness. A centered life of spiritual discipline learns to receive the various seasons of life trusting that God is always present.

Despite the many gifts that reflection and contemplation provide, we still often resist. There are numerous reasons for why we might set aside time for reflection and contemplation. Some reasons include ministry assignments, personalities, relationships, our work or home environment, the need to keep up with youth culture, etc. Even some worshipping congregations with unhealthy expectations for involvement can be a hindrance. Recent studies indicate the average congregation on a Sunday morning can tolerate only fifteen seconds of silence before someone feels compelled to break it with an announcement, a song, testimony or something else. Ironically, the church often impedes our efforts to reach inward and upward toward God when the congregation spends all of its time emphasizing social connections, busyness, and noise.

Though reasons vary for why we set aside time with God, they often stem from our need to belong with God. There is within us all a deep longing for a sense of belonging, and a desire to figure out things related to life and love. There can be multiple desires within us, the desire to be good and the desire to sin, the desire to live a simple life and the desire to indulge in all that life has to offer. Reflection and contemplation guide us into discovering those deeper longings that throughout our day normally go unnoticed or unchallenged. Discovering these deep longings may actually be painful because they reveal core issues at work within us. Through solitude, silence and contemplation we confront ego, pride, self-rejection, hurts, bitterness, and others. A willingness to work these out in our lives will eventually bring new life.

At first the practice of silence and contemplation may be very difficult. Intruding thoughts, body aches, fear of silence, discomfort with God or ourselves all work to block our efforts. However, taking those intruding thoughts into God's presence, if we follow them out, may actually be a tool to inform us about something we need to address. The important thing is to practice, and even experiment. Know that physical movement within silence is okay and good. In fact, many people often discover pain or fatigue as they begin to practice silence and stillness. The point is to listen to your life.

A simple way to begin to develop a reflective spirit might be to begin with daily prayers, specifically, morning, afternoon and evening prayers. For centuries, people have been pausing throughout their days to reflect on God if only for a few moments. Scripture reading is another way to reflect and is perhaps the most common way we can contemplate on the character and ways of God as well as find direction for our own lives. Many Christians have used *Lectio Divina*, a sacred reading of the scriptures, as a way to pray through scripture that is different than normal Bible study. Developed during a time when most people were illiterate and books were not easily accessible, *Lectio Divina* became a way for the congregation to meditate on the message they heard in the scriptures.

As we cultivate this reflective spirit we may come to find that we are more willing to bring unpleasant encounters or relationships before God especially as we are made aware of our anxieties. All of us at one point will encounter someone who is angry with us or who is difficult for us to love. One helpful exercise of praying for that person while also bringing ourselves into prayer is to pray the Lord's Prayer by inserting their name in the prayer as often as possible. For example,

“ _____’s Father in Heaven,
may your name be honored.
May your kingdom come soon,
May your will be done in _____’s life just as it is in heaven.
Give _____ food for today,
and forgive _____’s sins,
as he/she forgives those who have sinned against him/her.
And don’t let _____ yield to temptation,
but deliver _____ from evil.
For yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

I know no other remedy for healing from pain caused by someone else than to pray for them; to pray for their healing and wholeness. Prayer in this way personally transforms and creates a desire for their lives also to be transformed.

One final suggestion to consider for cultivating a reflective, contemplative spirit is the use of a prayer corner. A prayer corner or room or chair is simply a designated place you return to again and again to encounter God. You may choose to place some things there, favorite books or objects that have special meaning for you in your spiritual journey.

The spiritual life draws us into the reality that all of life belongs to God. Everything that makes up our lives is brought before God—our work, rest, play, relationships, home, times of renewal—these are all offered up to God who sanctifies them all.

Space for Discernment

As we learn to create space to develop reflective and contemplative spirits we naturally enter into the process of discernment. Many of our daily decisions are small. But we are always in the process of making bigger decisions—choosing right from wrong, giving and taking, knowing when to move forward or to wait, not to mention the host of issues facing those we lead. These bigger decisions impact not only our individual lives but those around us. There are many ways spiritual discernment can impact our faith journey and our communities but for our purposes we will focus on how discernment impacts the way we make decisions as we attempt to minister out of a healthy center.

Developing a Healthy and Balanced Life of Work, Rest, Play, Relationships and Renewal

What does a balanced life look like to you? In the midst of our increasingly busy lives the concept of balance may seem like a dream. But a more careful analysis of our habits might reveal that there are numerous ways to bring a healthier sense of balance into our lives. Balance is a lifelong process and does not mean that every area of our life—our work, relationships, rest, play—is always given an equal amount of time. Rather, balance is the careful work of knowing when any of those areas need our most focused attention.

Balancing all the areas of our lives requires that we learn to say “no” to things we love in order to make room for other things or relationships that nourish us in different ways. Saying no may be so difficult that, at first, it may be painful and feel like a loss. As we work, balance begins to make sense, honors our relationships and all things that make us whole beings. The greatest gift you can give to those that follow you is to lead a faithful, balanced, life centered on life in Christ.

There are various elements that make up a healthy, balanced life—meaningful work, rest for our mind and bodies, play, relationships, and renewal. Meaningful work gives us a sense of purpose and place in God’s kingdom because we are invited to participate in the co-creation of our workplace and the relationships within that setting. Ministry is a great responsibility yet even the most meaningful work can lead to fatigue if we do not take time out to rest so that the natural process of renewal for our bodies and our minds can take place.

Play is another important aspect of our lives. While many might challenge the notion that the youth worker needs to include more play into their lives, the reality is that in youth ministry the lines between work and play can get blurred. Play can look very different depending on the person. For some play can be listening to music, exercise, gardening, or reading a book. Good play that gives us rest from our work and strengthens us for the ongoing journey.

Relationships, specifically friendships, may take several forms worth considering.

- Spiritual Friendships—those friendships that encourage us and with whom we can pray. This may be a small group or prayer partner.
- Life-Giving Relationships—those friends that are easy to be with. They help us laugh and bring joy into our life.
- Close friendships—those friends that know our story and with whom we can share joy, pain and sorrow. These persons often recognize our fatigue before we do.
- Mentoring Relationships—those persons who have walked the journey ahead of us and who help us see who we really are; help us identify our strengths and weaknesses and continually point us to God.
- Committed Relationships—those persons in our life with whom we have committed relationships because whether they are family or not, we have committed to walk the journey closely with them. These relationships are often the most difficult to sustain but also can be the greatest source of growth.

Ultimately, we need a range of relationships to sustain our lives. Finally, there are numerous ways to find renewal but the most common is simply rest. Rest is essential to the Christian minister because the work we do can be such an emptying process. Throughout our days there are numerous things that either deplete or rejuvenate our energy for life and work. A lot of spiritual fatigue may well be physical fatigue.

Knowing how to work for God's approval before the approval of others

Colossians 3:23-24 states. "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." Our insecurities are often so deceptive that they often blind us from the varied and mixed motives always at work within us.

There is within us all a desire to belong and to perhaps confuse that belonging with the accolades we receive through our ministry and service to the church. We all like to be liked. We enjoy the attention we receive when an event or a lesson has gone well. We enjoy being sought out by others and enjoy being able to help others. All of these can be very healthy ways to interact with others and let us know we are being helpful ministers. It is when we rely solely on these encounters and allow them to feed our ego that we become unhealthy. Relying too much on the feedback we receive from others often just sends us into emotional upheaval because we run around trying to please others rather than ministering out of our deep convictions developed from a reflective life. A truly reflective heart knows the insecurities at work in the inner life and is able to name and face these insecurities in the presence of God in humility and without fear.

Life as Prayer

Praying without ceasing and doing all to the glory of God

If prayer is anything, it is first and foremost practicing the presence of God. But prayer is also a way to encounter ourselves and God. In his book, *Praying the Psalms*, Walter Brueggeman describes the various experiences or phases in our journey to describe the Christian life and the movement of many Biblical stories. The basic premise is that we are always moving through three phases: Orientation, Disorientation and Reorientation. Brueggeman suggests that the Psalms are a way to pray through these phases, particularly the disoriented phase; a stage he believes we encounter most throughout life.

We all experience moments of Orientation, moments when we have a sense of a clear direction; when life seems fairly whole and balanced. We are content and at peace with ourselves, others and life in general. The ground beneath us seems fairly sturdy, the road ahead often exciting, and our options wide and varying.

We all experience moments of Disorientation. Any time we experience the pain of loss, deception, grief, shattered dreams, false hope, and difficult transitions, among many other things, we are ushered into a state of disorientation. Though our default mode may be to see a set-back as only a frustration, a mirror of our not-yet-mastered faults or weaknesses, these times are not only healthy patterns of growth, but are quite necessary to our development as human beings.

We all experience moments of Reorientation, when we emerge from disorientation with a renewed sense of hope and often a renewed understanding of God or the faith journey. It is the resting place; the calm after the storm of disorientation that makes it possible for us to move forward with a renewed sense of trust in God. So, praying the Psalms becomes a very helpful way to pray through the various seasons of our spiritual pilgrimage and growth.

Prayer is paying attention to all of life—your life in particular, the life of those around you, the world, your work, relationships. Prayer can also be continual. Practicing the presence of God, attributed to 17th century monk Brother Lawrence, includes desire to maintain an ongoing conversation with God throughout the day and regardless of the task.

We have talked much about being people of balance, spiritual disciplines, reflection and prayer. A way of maintaining accountability for these practices is to create a Rule of Life. A Rule of Life simply states that we believe there are practices that advance, deepen, enrich and convert us, both as individuals and congregations. Prayer is paying attention in our encounters with God. Through these daily prayers and encounters we center our lives on the Holy One, continually inclining our hearts, continually seeking and being found in Christ, continually resting in God's presence until our lives become a prayer to God.

Application

Interview 2-3 people and ask them about the spiritual practices they have found to be meaningful in their life.

Choose a spiritual practice introduced to you through this session and attempt to practice this every day this week.

In a prayerful act, answer the following questions and ask God to reveal those areas in your life where you may need a better sense of balance.

- How do you create space for your relationship with God?
- What can I eliminate from my life to draw closer to God?
- Are there moments during the day when I can capture time with God?
- Is there a specific place where I can do that?

Identify key friends, opportunities for renewal, play and rest that might help you this coming week.

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

What are some external things we do simply because we are Christians? What are some internal qualities or, character shaping qualities we gain as a result of being Christian? Does our external faith, the things we do, always influence our internal faith? What is the relationship between our external and internal faith?

Would you say that your life is currently organized around God and His ways?

When you consider the disciplines you listed, is there a qualitative life to them or do you find yourself simply performing these tasks? Is the list of disciplines diverse or similar?

What criteria did you use to gather these—based on frequency, personality-based, perhaps their effectiveness, other factors?

Which of the forms of prayer presented appeal to you personally?

What forms of prayer have provided you with opportunities to listen, as well as talk with God?

How do you accomplish Sabbath?



Nazarene Youth International