



NAC-USA  
DEVELOPMENT  
INSTITUTE

**Spiritual  
Disciplines**

**Reading  
Scripture**

**Fasting**

**Solitude and  
Silence**

# MIDWEEK SCRIPT

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**2018**

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October

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## Session 1 – Spiritual Disciplines

Hello, and welcome to our first midweek session for the month of October. The divine services in this month will focus on how we can experience the presence of God today, and every day. God is everywhere because He is omnipresent. So, we might think, shouldn't it be easy to experience God?

Experiencing God requires an awareness of His presence as well as a connection with Him. Over the course of our lifetime, our relationship with Him can deepen when we strive to make this connection stronger. This is how our faith matures.

On this journey of becoming more and more like Jesus, we should constantly compare ourselves to the example that He set for us. And, in looking at Jesus' example, we can see that He regularly exercised spiritual disciplines – or habits – to connect with His Father. Jesus prayed, He fasted, studied the Scriptures, and practiced solitude, just to name a few. These are all spiritual disciplines that we are expected to practice as well.

Now, maybe you've heard the term "spiritual disciplines" before. This term, "discipline," usually conjures up some negative feelings because we might associate that word with punishment or being reprimanded, like the way you would discipline a child after they've done something wrong. But in this context, the word "discipline" refers to training and dedication to creating good habits. Spiritual disciplines are not about punishment. They're behaviors and activities that equip you to be sustainably engaged in a deepening relationship with God.

In his first letter to Timothy, Apostle Paul compares what we might call "spiritual training" to physical training. In chapter 4 we read, *.....exercise yourself toward godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come* (1 Timothy 4:7-8).

Now, you might think, "Well, that type of spiritual training is intended for ordained ministers or for 'holy people.'" But that's not true. A true follower of Jesus longs to know the heart of God. The psalmist says in chapter 42 that *as the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God* (Psalm 42:1-2). Can we also say that our soul *thirsts* for God? He created in us a need for connection with Him, but He gives us the free will to choose to love Him or not. If you've made the choice to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and to strive for eternal fellowship with Him, then you need to believe and follow the teachings and example of His Son. In order to be disciples of Jesus, we must be "disciplined" in His teachings.

Of course, spiritual disciplines can be challenging. They require you to be intentional and exercise self-control. To be a disciple of Jesus requires us to be open to His teaching, and yes, even correction, and thereby, transformation. On their own, spiritual disciplines as an activity or behavior don't transform us. They're not about checking off a list of behaviors so that we can feel satisfied. In other words, spiritual disciplines are not an end, but rather the means.

We don't become godly because we practice spiritual disciplines, but rather, because of the work God does in us when we intentionally create the time and space to connect with Him through spiritual disciplines. Such spiritual habits allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us. The necessary growth and transformation can only happen when our motives are genuine and we sincerely want to connect with God, instead of trying to "look the part" or wanting to impress our neighbors.

Now, in addition to the disciplines I mentioned at the beginning – including prayer, fasting, scripture, and solitude – there are other disciplines, too, such as worship, obedience, service, confession, giving, and meditation. This month, we'll explore the spiritual disciplines of studying scripture, fasting, and silence and solitude. As you consider each of these disciplines, remember that it's not just about the activity itself, but about the attitude and motive with which you approach that discipline.

Spiritual disciplines are not about *doing*, but rather about *being*. So I encourage you to intentionally make time and space to be with God, so that He can transform you to become more like Jesus.

## Session 2 – Reading Scripture

Welcome back. Today we're going to look at how we experience the presence of God through reading Scripture.

Now, before you think, "Oh great, you want me to memorize the Bible?" – that's not what this is about. It's about building a great habit that is for *your* benefit. Maybe you feel you don't know Scripture, or that it's too hard to read. But I suspect you know more than you've given yourself credit for.

For instance, you probably know the phrase, *The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want...* That's from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, one of the many beautiful Psalms written by David in Scripture. It's a great reminder that the Lord is with us and will provide for us.

A favorite Bible verse of mine comes from Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.* This encourages us that we need to trust in the Lord, and not our own ideas. If we openly put Him first, He will direct our lives in the best way.

Now, reading the Bible can seem intimidating. It's a big book. Actually, it's a compilation of 66 books – 39 in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New Testament. So, I encourage you to not look at it like other books, where you sit down and read it in one or even a few sittings. In fact, reading it cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation, is likely not the best way to approach it. Since the most important aspect of Scripture is about Jesus, a great place to start is with the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Now, maybe you're thinking, "I have no time for that!" Well, try to add Bible reading to your life in simple ways. For example, replace a few minutes of checking social media with reading from one of the Gospels for five or ten minutes – or longer! If you're waiting for a train or bus, or maybe for a friend to arrive, pull up a chapter from John on your phone. You can download useful Bible apps, such as Bible Gateway or Blue Letter Bible, or even just use your web browser. Whatever form of the Bible you use, reading even just a few verses can change your whole perspective on life.

For example, when you read, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life* (John 3:16), consider how much love God truly has for us that He was willing to give up His only Son in order to save us.

Or when Jesus said, *Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends* (John 15:13), recognize that Jesus was talking about how much love He has for us!

Scripture was given for us to use. So let's use it!

I encourage you to make reading Scripture a daily habit, just like exercise or other positive habits. Even just five minutes a day is a good start. And then build up from there.

There are many benefits to being intentional about reading Scripture, such as helping you to know God, appreciating His faithfulness to mankind, and seeing God's plan throughout history.

Reading Scripture can also:

- Help us learn about Jesus
- Show us how to love others
- Renew our hope
- And strengthen our faith

Apostle John summed it up well as he completed his account of the gospel: *...but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name* (John 20:31).

Reading Scripture also connects us to other spiritual disciplines.

For example, regarding the discipline of prayer, the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John gives us insight into how Jesus prayed to the Father. We see the importance of oneness when Jesus prayed: *I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me* (John 17:20-21). We, too, should pray for oneness in the same way Jesus prayed for it because it is truly important!

Another discipline that Scripture inspires is worship. A song we often sing called, *The Lord is my Light*, actually comes right from the 27<sup>th</sup> Psalm:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;  
Whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the strength of my life;  
Of whom shall I be afraid?*

What a powerful way to praise the almighty God who is our light and salvation, and the strength of our life!

So, as you practice the habit of reading Scripture in conjunction with the other spiritual disciplines, you will discover that the Lord truly loves you, is with you, and wants you with Him for all eternity. That's what it means to experience His presence daily.

### **Session 3 – Fasting**

Welcome back! In this session, we'll continue learning about spiritual disciplines, focusing on the discipline of fasting. Now, this is not a term we talk much about, so let's look at it a little deeper.

To fast means to voluntarily go without eating, or some other regular activity such as a hobby or social media, for the sake of a spiritual purpose.

In Scripture, we find many instances of fasting in both the Old and New Testaments. Here, fasting often took on the form of abstaining from food, and it was a practice used for a variety of spiritual purposes. For instance, the king of Nineveh and his people fasted and prayed to repent (Jonah 3:5-10). The prophetess, Anna, fasted to worship God (Luke 2:37). Paul and Barnabas fasted to seek God's wisdom for newly appointed leaders in the church (Acts 14:23). And Jesus fasted in the wilderness to prepare Himself to do His Father's work (Matthew 3:16 – 4:4). In each of these examples, these people looked to God for something and used fasting as a way to intentionally focus on Him.

Now, we might ask ourselves: are we commanded to fast? Nowhere in the Bible does it explicitly say that Christians are required to fast. But if we look at Jesus' teachings, and His own example of fasting, we can see that He has an expectation that His disciples will fast at some point. He understood fasting as a practice that His followers can use in their lives to refocus on God.

Jesus even talked with the disciples about fasting. In Matthew chapter 6, He says to them, *Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting... But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly* (Matthew 6:16-18).

You see, the Pharisees often made it a point to make their fasting known to others so they would be seen as pious. But in this teaching, Jesus tells His disciples that when they fast, they should not call attention to themselves – and this applies to us, too. If we make the decision to fast in our own lives, it must always be centered on God. He is our primary reason for fasting.

A similar teaching about fasting the right way can be found in Isaiah 58. In this chapter, the people questioned why their suffering and abstaining from food didn't attract God's attention. Through the prophet Isaiah, God tells the people He does not accept their fast. They believed that their fasting made them look like obedient believers, but God knew their fasting didn't change them. While they fasted and believed that they were acting righteously, they were still persisting in their old ways – they did whatever they desired whether it was right or wrong; they exploited their servants; they fought with one another; and they didn't feed the hungry or offer shelter to those who needed it. Their fasting had no spiritual effect on them. God didn't need the people to fast for the sake of upholding the law – His purpose for their fast was to serve others, to go out and *do* something. But instead, they fasted to get what *they* wanted and to look good in God's eyes. Their focus wasn't on glorifying God, but glorifying themselves.

Fasting is a biblical way to truly humble yourself in the eyes of God. Yes, we may feel a little pain or discomfort over what we've chosen to give up, but it's not just about skipping meals or deciding to take a break from social media – fasting has a deeper purpose. It is an intentional action done to better your relationship with God. During our fasting, we strive to inwardly be in constant prayer, worship, and adoration of God. This brings our focus to Him and helps us to fast in a way that pleases God. It's an opportunity to look at things and people the way God sees them. It's an opportunity to stop dwelling on our own needs or pleasures, and instead, be sincere in our conversations, help others, and give cheerfully.

Whatever we abstain from when fasting, we replace it with actions dedicated to God. When you fast in this way, you don't have to feel miserable over what you've given up, but rather you can experience great joy because you know that God sustains you and secures your future. Interestingly, it says in Isaiah 58 that God promised His people if they fasted properly, He would guide them and be delighted in them, and they would be the foundation for many generations. Isn't that wonderful? God also makes these promises to us for our future when we glorify Him in our fasting.

So, any time we explore passages in the Bible that involve food, or fasting from food, we can be reminded of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, chapter 6, He tells the disciples, *I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst* (John 6:35). Of course, Jesus isn't talking about never having to eat food again so that our body can live. He's talking about everlasting life. He's talking about the presence of God and our ability to have a relationship with Him. In society, we are constantly being enticed to satisfy our appetites and desires. And yet, this might just be why we need to fast in our lives. Our fasting – whether it is from food, hobbies, technology, or something else – reveals the things that control us. Are those things earthly or heavenly? During a fast, we choose to put the earthly things aside and come closer to God. When we dwell in His presence, He becomes the most important focus in our lives. He is all we need. We are fully satisfied by Him. So, when you fast, you can be reminded of what is truly essential in your life – an eternal relationship with the Triune God.

#### **Session 4 – Solitude and Silence**

*...but the Lord was not in the wind...the Lord was not in the earthquake...[and] the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice* (1 Kings 19:1-19).

Welcome! In this last session, we're going to talk about the disciplines of solitude and silence. The Bible verse that I just read is taken from 1 Kings, chapter 19 – the account of Elijah going into the wilderness and up to Mount Horeb to experience the presence of God. But, Elijah is not the only example of solitude and silence in the Bible. In the New Testament, we often read of Jesus going off by Himself to pray and seek God's guidance (Matthew 14:23, Mark 1:35, Mark 6:46, Luke 5:16 Luke 6:12).

So, how can solitude and silence have a place in our lives? What purpose do they serve besides time for prayer? And who has time to sit in silence anyways?

Let's begin by considering this discipline in a very practical way. How would you actually practice this in your daily life?

To engage in the disciplines of solitude and silence, first, find a sacred space, a place set apart for God. This is not only a physical space, but also a *time* set apart for God. Next, decide how much time you are going to spend in silence. Remember, the amount of time is not as important as the regularity. Pay attention to your body; sit in a comfortable, yet alert, position. Use a simple prayer that expresses your desire for God's presence, such as "Here I am, Lord." This phrase will help bring you back from distraction.

Solitude and silence, like all other disciplines, don't require "more" of our time – they require intention and practice. If you were given two more hours in a day, chances are that you would fill it up with the same things you fill the other 24 hours with. To practice solitude is *to choose to be alone and do nothing*, to give up accomplishment. And silence completes it. Until we enter quietness, the world around us still commands our attention and distracts us.

This can be a very difficult thing to do in a society that demands productivity and achievement. But in solitude, we are free from human demands and can focus on God, in whom we want to live, move, and have our whole being (Acts 17:28).

To practice solitude and silence, we have to let go. Psalm 46:10 reads, *Be still and know that I am God....* The Hebrew word for "be still" literally means to "let go of your grip." So what are you gripping that you need to let go of?

Maybe it's **control**. Perhaps we think that if we walk away from everything going on in our family or at work for just 15 minutes, it will all fall apart. Can we accept the fact that we are not indispensable? Can we trust God with our lives enough to disconnect?

Another might be **fear**. Does the thought of sitting alone in complete silence intimidate you? Solitude and silence are frightening because when we strip everything else away, we are very vulnerable in that moment. When I cut off everything going on in the world, and I sit in silence and solitude, it's just God and me. And in that quiet, what if it turns out that there is actually very little between God and me? Perhaps we fear that God will not show up in our quiet time. We need to let go of our fears and realize that in these moments, we are simply accepting what God offers us. We have to let go of trying to use our efforts and instead receive what God wants to give us, placing ourselves at the mercy of His time.

We must also let go of our **perceived identity** – the way that we define ourselves by our roles and responsibilities. The question is, who are you when you're doing nothing? How would you describe yourself if you couldn't reference your job, your school, your hobbies, or your family relationships? In solitude and silence, we can't run back to the distractions of our lives that make us believe that we are worth something in our own eyes, or in the eyes of others. In solitude and silence, our old self dies and the new life that we have in Christ becomes clearer. Who does God say that I am?

Okay, once we let go of all of these things, what happens in solitude and silence?

We **notice what is true**. If we return briefly to Elijah in the wilderness, it says that he collapsed under a broom tree and slept. Then an angel woke him and told him to eat, to gain strength for the journey ahead. When we've left behind our distractions and sit in silence, what do we notice about ourselves? Are we weary? Are we coming to meet God in moments of joy or grief? When God asked Elijah what he was doing in the wilderness, Elijah told God exactly where he was in life – the good, the bad, and the ugly – when he said: *I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life* (1 Kings 19:10). Can you relate?

Sometimes we need to see ourselves for who we are and name it in the presence of God. Then, in silence and solitude, we can **give space** to those emotions. Whether it's gratitude, joy, anger, or grief – noticing and giving space to these feelings in the presence of God deepens our relationship with Him. We can also see the same things happening when we read the Psalms. David doesn't hesitate to express his very raw emotions and turmoil to God. But as we continue to read, we see that in these moments David gains very real strength and

comfort from God to carry on. As a shepherd, often alone with his sheep, David spent many moments in solitude and silence, perhaps giving time and space to develop the many beautiful emotions we read about in Psalms.

God's way of making Himself known to us in such moments is very individual and personal, and perhaps even inexplicable. But as we practice these disciplines, we learn to recognize His presence and guidance. We will come to understand that God's love receives us just as we are.

And finally, our time in solitude and silence also **gives us perspective**. Solitude and silence brings us back to our Creator. As the Psalmist said, *When I consider Your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him...?* (Psalm 8:3-4). When we focus on the vastness and power of God, we begin to see ourselves in the right way. We begin to notice His hand in our lives. And we can again use the words of the Psalmist, *I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well* (Psalm 139:14). Our time in solitude and silence can also prepare us to hear the word of God in the divine service, and especially prepare us for Holy Communion. It takes time away from the noise and clutter of life to acknowledge, repent, and confess our sins to God.

As we conclude this series on spiritual disciplines, I encourage you to make the time and space to experience God's presence in prayer, reading Scripture, in fasting, and in solitude, to create deeply ingrained habits that intensify your relationship with Him and allow you to feel His guiding hand in your life.