



7 PRACTICES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

by Justin Boothby

INTRODUCTION

As I grew up in the church I would occasionally ask the question, “How do I grow closer to God?” Oftentimes I would hear responses like, “Just pray more” or “Just read your Bible more.” I always hated those answers because they’re simply not practical. So what did I do? I went to college and seminary and got two degrees in “Practical Theology” because I believe that theology is not just a theoretical discussion but a practice to live out and grow in.

During His time on earth, Jesus taught us real, practical ways of growing closer to God and I believe these seven practices will help you as you strive for spiritual growth and transformation. Of course, this list is not exhaustive and I’m sure there are other great practices out there I did not include. I did, however, want to hit on topics that people weren’t really expounding on. There is more to the Christian life than just prayer and “read more Scripture.” We need to break out of this monotonous cycle of cookie cutter Christianity we’ve allowed ourselves to be baked into. We need to go deeper! There are pragmatic and impactful ways of growing closer to God and I believe these practices can help us achieve that!

This whole guide was sparked in 2017 when I was asked to answer six questions about spiritual transformation. Those questions were:

- 1. To you, what is spiritual transformation and is it important? If so, why?*
- 2. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual transformation?*
- 3. What is the role of the Christian in his or her spiritual transformation?*
- 4. Does your church have a spiritual transformation plan? If so, what is it?*
- 5. In your opinion, what are the essential spiritual practices that Christians need to do to grow spiritually? Why these?*
- 6. What is the biggest barrier to a person growing spiritually?*

As you work through this curriculum, take the time to read through the scriptures presented and think through the questions asked. Spiritual growth is an important element in the life of the Christ-follower but we cannot grow effectively if we never allow ourselves to be convicted. In John 15:1-2 Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”

The best way to grow effectively is to allow ourselves to be pruned. The truth is that it’s going to be painful. It’s hard to look at our faults and our imperfections. However, Jesus doesn’t just cut off those things that hinder us from spiritual growth and leave us to die. He offers us grace in the midst of our journey so that we can grow in love, and patience, and kindness. Spiritual growth is not easy and this is why it’s best done in community and with people who are encouraging and empowering you to grow. Welcome to the 7 Practices of Spiritual Growth!



COMMUNION

Introduction

I'll be honest with you — I don't think Communion is practiced enough in the church. This is evidenced by its once a month occurrence in many congregations. Instead of communion being the focal point of meeting together as it was for the disciples, it's an afterthought that isn't really a part of the main worship service. It seldom fits in the normal time slot, it's usually at the very end, and because it usually makes the service go longer, people tend to lose their passion for the sacrament.

However, communion is one of the most important elements of the Christian life. It's a reminder of the price Jesus paid for us. It should convict us of our sin and faults, while also leading us to seek forgiveness as we grow toward spiritual maturity (John 6:53-58; Acts 2:42-46). It is our way of evaluating our life so that we can make the proper adjustments needed to continue our spiritual growth (1 Corinthians 11:28).

Let's read through John 6:52-58:

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."



If someone told you to eat their body and drink their blood, how would you react?

How does taking communion help us to remain in Jesus?

Notes:



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History

Let's look at how and why communion was formed to give us a better understanding into the importance of this sacrament. Even if you're new to the faith, you've most likely heard of the Last Supper. The Last Supper was the last meal Jesus shared with His disciples before He went to the Cross. It was the night that Jesus washed the feet of the disciples and the night that Jesus declared who would betray Him. It was a night the disciples would not soon forget as it became the staple for them meeting together in the future. While we have several dynamics going on here, one that is seldom discussed is that this was likely the Passover Seder meal. In Hebrew, the word Seder means "order" and this meal is celebrated by Jews each year at the beginning of Passover. Jesus was very intentional about using the Seder as the foundation for communion.

Matzah

Let's look at the bread first. During Passover, you are not allowed to eat anything with leaven in it. In fact, to this day, Jews in Israel will do a "Passover Cleaning" where they take out all of the leaven in their houses. Many of them will burn the leaven outside and their houses will be empty of any leaven during the time of Passover. The only bread you can eat is matza bread, which is made of pure flour and water, without leaven, and it's pierced. Sound familiar? What's even more striking is the symbolism of leaven.

Let's read 1 Corinthians 5:6:

"Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch - as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." Leaven was a synonym for sin.



What's a sin that you need to get rid of to grow in your walk with Jesus?

Notes:



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History (cont.)

But that's not all the Matzah bread has to offer in the picture of Christ during the Seder. In the Seder we have one napkin, called the Echad or Unity, that has three different compartments which each hold three different matzoth. These compartments represent the Priest (Cohen), Levi, and Israel. The middle matzah is taken out during the Seder and broken in half. The larger piece that's broken is called the Afikomen, which means "that which comes after" or "dessert." This piece is placed in a napkin and hidden away until after dinner. Following the Seder dinner, the children go and find the Afikomen, bring it back to the host, and there is a

There is clear imagery here between Jesus and matzah. Jesus was the sacrificial Passover Lamb that took away our sins and rescued us from God's judgment. Now, when we dig a little bit further, we can see that during the time between the First and Second Temple periods, the Priests were unable to make the sacrifices because the Temple had been destroyed. In place of the Passover Lamb at the Temple, the rabbis instructed the people to continue observing Passover using Mazoth. Therefore, in the eyes of Jews living in the Second Temple Period in the first century, they already equated the Matzoth with the Passover sacrifices. When Jesus asks the Disciples to take the bread and view it as His body, He was telling them that this body represented the Passover Lamb that would rescue us from our bondage to sin. After all, Jesus name "Yeshua" in Hebrew means "He will rescue."

Wine

Now you may be wondering, "What about the wine?" Great question! During the Seder we have four cups of wine. These cups are all based on the four promises of God during Passover. God wanted His people to know that He was about to do something mighty for them and gave them four promises to prepare them for what was about to happen in Egypt. This not only gave them hope that their bondage was coming to an end, but it also gave the Egyptians a warning to get things right or pay the price.

Let's read Exodus 6:6-7:

"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.'"

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When you started following Jesus and God forgave you of your sins, how did you feel?

Do you feel like you've grown since you began following Jesus? Why or why not?

History (cont.)

Cup of Redemption

The phrase, "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm" is used for the third cup - the Cup of Redemption. This is the cup that's identified as the blood of the Passover Lamb as well as the cup we drink immediately after we eat the Afikomen. What's interesting about this phrase is that when God used it in Exodus 6:6, he was actually mocking the Egyptian Pharaohs. "Outstretched Arm" or "Mighty Hand" is a common phrase in Egyptian Literature, to the point that Pharaoh was known as "Neb Khopesh" which means "Lord of the Strong Arm." This phrase was used throughout ancient Near Eastern cultures for kings and gods. So what does Jesus do? How does He redeem us? With an outstretched arm on the cross to bring us out from our burden and bondage to sin. While I believe all cups are important to communion, it's no doubt that the Redemption Cup is the Communion Cup. Finally, we can rest assured that we have a God who loves us as he takes all mankind, not just the Jews, to be His people and He is our God. We are adopted, and as Paul says in Romans 11, we are branches that are grafted into the root.

After you celebrate the Passover, you will never look at communion the same way again. You will have a deeper appreciation for communion and understanding of what Jesus actually did for us during His time on earth. As I contend, communion is a way of taking us back to Easter each time we take it. For this reason, I believe we should take it each week or each time the

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Requirements For Communion

As we observe communion, we cannot take the elements as if we are just eating any other piece of bread or juice/wine. Paul notes that people who take communion need to examine themselves before taking it and consequently, one must be a follower of Jesus in order to take the elements. Paul suggests that people are actually getting incredibly sick when taking communion without actually examining themselves and taking it nonchalantly.

Let's read 1 Corinthians 11:27-32:

“So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.”



When you take communion today and examine yourselves, what does your thought process look like before you eat and drink? Are you taking the time to examine yourselves?

Practicing Communion

In Acts 2:42, the beginning of the church, tells us that the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. In this one verse, we see communion being just as important as teaching, prayer, and fellowship. If we believe that going to church on Sunday mornings is important for spiritual growth, then we must also believe, like the Apostles that communion should be a part of each worship service.

This will most likely be a huge shock to those with Catholic or denominational backgrounds, but you do not need a priest or a pastor to bless communion. There is nothing in the Bible that says you need to have your communion blessed to take it. There are only two requirements for communion: You must be a follower of Jesus and you must take it sincerely (1 Cor. 11:28). I have also heard stories of couples taking communion each morning they wake up as a way to start their day. It's a great way to remember that as a Christ-follower, each day is meant to be lived out with purpose and mission. My only caution is that you never let communion become an apathetic ritual. Whether you take it once a day or once a month, it should always be a time to examine yourself, seek forgiveness, and be 100% present with Jesus.

Communion has the power to take us back to Easter every time we observe it and this is why it's important to spiritual growth. Each time we take it we're reminding ourselves of our first love we had for the Lord and that first time we felt that freedom from our sin. Communion has the power through the Holy Spirit to convict us and catalyze spiritual transformation and maturity (John 16:8-14). Not only does it remind us of the sacrifice that was made because of our sin, it also shifts us to hope for the future when we will be united with Christ and our pain and tears will be no more (Rev. 21:4).



COMMUNION

Let's Share Communion Together

Matthew 26:26-29

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

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