



SPIRITUAL PRACTICES
FIELD GUIDE



FOUR OAKS CHURCH

Spiritual Practices Field Guide

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Abstract

New Testament scholar D. A. Carson once astutely observed:

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.¹

Here's another way to say that: our souls won't take the **shape** of Christlikeness unless the **stencil** of Christ's habits is consistently applied. Unlike stencils, a one-time application of the means of grace won't result in cruciform lives. But as we discipline ourselves to use God's means of grace, the Spirit molds our souls over time to form us into the likeness of Jesus.

This field guide is our attempt to help you place yourself under the Spirit's soul-stenciling ministry by habitually partaking in the means of grace as you walk the path of life with Jesus.

¹ Carson, D.A. *For the Love of God, Volume 2*, Jan. 23 entry.

What We Will Cover in this Field Guide

A field guide is a resource that offers a lay of the land. This introductory overview of spiritual practices is meant to give you accessible ways to embrace daily the way of Jesus. These disciplines are habits that help us inhabit the world we desire to taste, see, and know more fully.

As with anything else — from weight loss to strength training to learning a musical instrument to acquiring a new competency — the habits we embrace go a long way in determining whether or not we become who we desire to be (a healthier person, a stronger person, a piano player, etc.).

While habitual protein consumption, push-up sets, and piano scales are beneficial, there are no habits more life-giving and rewarding than the “habits of grace” (as David Mathis calls them). In this field guide, we will explore these habits by answering six basic questions:

- For whom are these habits?
- What are these habits?
- When are we to practice them?
- Where should we practice them?
- Why should we practice them?
- How should we practice them?

We'll address the first five questions in chapter one as we seek to understand the habits, then spend three chapters on the final question as we seek to embrace them.

Chapter 1: Understanding The Habits of Grace

For Whom are These Habits?

Quite simply, the habits of grace are for the children of God, the citizens of heaven. Paul says, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph. 5:1). One of the ways children learn is by imitating their parents. When Greg and Josh were on the phone talking about this guide, Greg’s young son Ethan was in the room with Greg. Greg made a comment that struck Ethan as funny, and he began repeating his dad’s words over and over. It was an everyday picture of something profound: from the words and expressions they speak to the body language and mannerisms they adopt, children take after their parents in ways that far exceed bone structure, for better or worse.

Through Christ, we have been adopted into God’s family so that we might imitate our Father and become like him (Rom. 8:15-16, Gal. 4:4-7). Look again at Ephesians 5:1. Paul identifies us as “beloved children,” using the same word God used to identify Jesus at His baptism when He said “This is my beloved Son” (Luke 3:22). We practice these habits, these means of grace, as beloved children seeking to imitate our heavenly Father. Just as children learn to mimic their parents as they spend time with them, so we learn to imitate God as He draws near in these means.

These habits are also for citizens of heaven. Our true and ultimate citizenship is in heaven (Phi. 3:20), and Jesus places a prayer in our hearts for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. As we practice them, the habits of grace form our hearts to fit

us for the city to which we belong, a city with foundations, whose designer and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). They make us love that city and long for our attainment of it.

What are these Habits?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, written in 17th century, helpfully identified what they called “the means of grace.”

Question 88: “What are the outward and ordinary means by which Christ imparts to us the benefits of redemption?”

Answer: “The outward and ordinary means by which Christ imparts to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the Word, the sacraments, and prayer; all of these are made effectual to his chosen ones for salvation.”

The means of grace are to be understood as the “means by which Christ imparts to us the benefits of redemption” in outward and ordinary circumstances. In other words, they are the practices God has given us that enable us to experience his grace, which is his undeserved favor, love, and redemption, in ordinary ways through the Word, the sacraments, and prayer. God’s gracious work is not limited to these means — He is always free to act through **extraordinary** means — but this is the ordinary place in which he makes his grace known to us.

In this we see that God doesn’t intend the glories of redemption to be like an elusive treasure in an unknown cave in an undiscovered land, but like the ready refreshment of water in an easily-accessible well. He wants us to experience the **benefits** of His grace. The Word, sacraments, and prayer are the principal ways by which we revel in our redemption. So when we practice hearing God’s Word, having God’s ear, and belonging to God’s people (this is David Mathis’s summary of means in his book *Habits*

of Grace), we dip our buckets into the well and drink. And as we do, the Holy Spirit refreshes and reforms our souls according to the pattern of Christlikeness.

When are We to Practice Them?

Consider these examples from Scripture. Yahweh told Israel He wanted His Word to be the content of their conversations “when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut. 6:4-8). He told Joshua to meditate on the Book of the Law “day and night” (Josh. 1:8). Similarly, the “blessed man” from Psalm 1 meditates on God’s Law “day and night.” Daniel had a habit of praying in the morning, at midday, and in the evening (Dan. 6:10). Jesus would often withdraw and pray (Luke 5:16). God wants these means of grace to be like well-worn tire tracks on the path to Christlikeness. ***This requires repeated, disciplined effort.***

It helps to create a daily, weekly, and even monthly rhythm for practicing the means. For example, you could say, “Every day I’m going to spend 20 minutes meditating on God’s Word while I drink my morning coffee. Then at lunch, I’m going to pause and pray the Lord’s Prayer with thoughtfulness. When I pull into the driveway at the end of my work day, I’m going to pause and thank God for the ways He met me and kept me that day.” This daily rhythm answers the “When?” question. You might say, “Every Saturday, I’m going to call someone from church to check on them and pray with them, and at least once a month, we’ll have someone over for lunch or dinner.” Those weekly and monthly habits are good ways to practice “belonging to God’s people.”

Here’s a secret: If you’re prioritizing attending worship every Lord’s Day, you’re already practicing the means with some regularity! Every Sunday, we gather to hear God’s Word read and preached, we have God’s ear to offer prayers of confession, adoration, and supplication, and we partake in the Lord’s Supper, a primary sacrament that marks us

out and nourishes us as God's people. So as a faithful church member, you already have at least one weekly rhythm in place.

Creating an intentional rhythm for life with God is called crafting a "rule of life," a strategy employed by Christians for centuries. When you write down your intention to embrace certain practices at certain times daily and weekly, you are seeking to answer the "when" question in a disciplined and decisive manner.

Where Should We Practice Them?

You can meditate on Scripture and pray anytime and anywhere. So from that perspective, "all the world's a stage" on which the means of grace can play out to the benefit of your soul's formation. But since we're thinking of the means of grace as disciplined habits, there are three primary places to highlight for practicing the means: the closet, the table, and the living room.

The Closet

In Matthew 6:6, Jesus tells His disciples to go into their "closet" (KJV) to pray. The point was for them to have a private, devoted space for fellowship with God. We can benefit from "consecrating" a space where we will practice the disciplines of meditation and prayer alone with God. That space could be an actual closet, but it could just as easily be the kitchen table, your car, a favorite chair, a place outside, or anywhere you can access with regularity and a semblance of privacy.

The Table

Along with the "closet," we also want to practice disciplines at the "table," a place where families and spiritual families gather to eat and fellowship. Throughout the Old

Testament, especially in passages like Deuteronomy 6, God wants our spiritual formation to be a family function, not just a personal project. So we should practice the disciplines with our family and spiritual family whenever possible. Families can embrace the simple practice of family worship by reading a psalm or other short text and praying over breakfast or dinner. Single saints can gather with roommates or close friends regularly to follow a similar pattern. If your roommates don't follow Christ, practicing at the table could serve as an opportunity for gospel conversations and to "let your light shine before them" (Matt. 5:16).

The Living Room

In addition to the closet and the table, we practice these disciplines in the "living room." We can use our residences where we rest and recreate as places of worship where God's Word is opened and prayers are offered. This is a good way of practicing "belonging to God's people." You could have a group phone call, a Zoom call, or a small group meeting where you gather with God's people to practice the means of grace together. You could even invite unbelieving friends to get a whiff of the "aroma of Christ...a fragrance of life" (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

Developing a plan to pursue Christ with specific locations in mind will help us to do so with sustainable discipline.

Why Do We Practice the Means of Grace as Spiritual Disciplines?

We partake in the means of grace to experience the blessings of redemption, to receive "a foretaste of glory divine," as the hymn *Blessed Assurance* says. We practice the means of grace because we want that experience of redemption to shape all of our other experiences in life. We want the foretaste of the Bread of life to refine the palate of our

souls, that we might crave God's presence and precepts more than the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16).

When the means of grace become "habits of grace," we are like the smitten couple who can't stop thinking of and talking to each other. Time and space are too narrow to contain the love they strive to express. They don't always realize it, but they've disciplined themselves in love to spend time with one another. The structure of their lives become little galaxies orbiting around the sun of their affection for each other. Love gives birth to disciplined pursuit, and disciplined pursuit sustains love.

We want our love for God to be like the love shared by that smitten couple. The good news for us is that, unlike that smitten couple, there is no law of diminishing returns with God! The more intimate we are with Him, the more we receive His love, we find that He is "beautiful, truly delightful" (Song of Songs 1:16).

How Do We Practice These Means?

Now that we've talked about the who, the what, the when, the where, and the why, there is only one question left, and it's the most urgent of all: "how?" We're going to follow David Mathis' helpful rubric by considering these powerful practices under three headings:

Hearing God's voice.

Having God's ear.

Belonging to God's people.

Chapter 2: Hearing God's Voice

When it comes to hearing God's Word, there is a variety of options. We can read it, study it, and memorize it. But when it comes to developing intimacy with God, meditation is the most helpful interaction we can have with Scripture.

Meditating and Eating

According to Adele Calhoun, "Meditation is not about emptying the mind so there is nothing there. Christian meditation opens us to the mind of God and to his world and presence in the world."² David Mathis offers this helpful clarification, "To *meditate* in Hebrew means literally to 'chew' on some thought (as an animal chews the cud) with the teeth of our minds and hearts. To ponder some reality, to roll some vision around on the tongue of our souls, savoring it as it deserves and seeking to digest it in such a way that produces real change and benefit in us."³

These *eating* words helpfully illustrate meditation because enjoying good food is a common, everyday experience that approximates meditation. Think of a favorite meal

² Adele Calhoun, *The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, p. 173.

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/meditate-to-move-mountains>

or a dessert you enjoy. When you eat it, you don't mindlessly devour it. As soon as that food touches your tongue, delicious sensations fill your mouth. You might close your eyes as you chew its soft, crunchy, or chewy texture with delight. You allow the flavor to fill your mind and captivate your taste buds as you looked forward to the next bite. That's what meditation is like.

Lectio Divina

The church has used a practice for millennia called "*lectio divina*,"⁴ reading Scripture to experience God, not merely to understand Him. This practice involves a simple four-step process:

1. **Lectio** (read)- First, select a text and read it slowly and with attentiveness. You might select a single verse, a handful of verses, or a story in Scripture. You could use this opportunity to try and memorize the Scripture.

2. **Meditatio** (meditate)- Read it again while paying attention to each word. Look at what comes before and after it. Engage your imagination for what the text pictures and seek to apply it to yourself. Here, you might ask, "What does this text show me about God? What's God doing here and what does it say about Him? How should I respond? How can I reflect His character?" Focus on the text as if it were a nutritious dessert for your soul. This takes time, so devote a few minutes here.

⁴ We recognize there are some who are uncomfortable with the term "Lectio Divina." It is a sad truth of church history that it has been used to go beyond Scripture to justify false teachings, particularly in the Middle Ages. Church authorities would claim "revelations" from God which were inaccessible to others; at times these revelations even directly contradicted Scripture. While this is true, this improper use in no way delegitimizes a Scripturally faithful, interpretively sound devotional reading of God's Word, which the Protestant Reformers themselves practiced and which we now commend.

3. **Oratio** (pray)- Respond to what God has shown you by praying. Praise Him, confess your sin and unbelief, thank Him for His grace, intercede for others. Allow these prayers to flow in response to what He's shown you in His word.

4. **Contemplatio** (contemplate and enjoy)- Don't rush on from the moment, but take time to rest in God's presence. The Spirit may have brought a sense of joy, peace, conviction, assurance, etc. Take it in and thank God for meeting you. In times where there is no sensible experience (which can be frequent), thank God for meeting you even when you can't sense Him.⁵

There are other forms of biblical meditation. For example, as you're meditating on 1 John 4:7-12, other passages like Romans 5:8, Exodus 34:6-7, or Psalm 136 might come to mind. You might think of the story of Ruth. In these moments, you can ponder how these passages relate to each other and fill out your imagination of what God's love is like. You might put yourself in Israel's shoes as they recited Psalm 136 in exile. This is a sort of whole-Bible meditation that enriches your understanding and experience.

You can also meditate on themes in Scripture, such as the sovereignty of God, the wonder of the cross, and God's vision of "the good life." Richard Baxter urged Christians to spend time imagining life in the New Creation. John Jefferson Davis calls this "worldview meditation"⁶ because through it you can comprehend themes that undergird a Christian perspective on all of life.

You can also practice what the Puritans called "occasional meditation," by focusing on creation as a means to show us the God revealed in the Bible. We can behold God's

⁵ John Jefferson Davis, *Meditation and Communion with God: Contemplating Scripture in an Age of Distraction*, p. 150.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

power, vastness, faithfulness, creativity, and holiness as we reflect on aspects of the the cosmos he created for the display of his glory.

As we meditate, we will experience Scripture as the “Talking Book,” as Black Christians called it. We will hear God’s voice through the Word He’s already spoken.

Next Step: What is one small step you can resolve to take to meditate more deeply on God’s word? You might choose a text, a space, and a time today, then decide to take that step tomorrow.

Chapter 3: Having God's Ear

What is prayer? Keach's Catechism answers this question, saying, "Prayer is an offering up of our desires to God, for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with the confession of sins and thankful acknowledgment of His mercies." In prayer, we offer our hearts, with all our brokenness, neediness, and sin, to God that we might receive His grace to help in our need (Heb. 4:16).

So how do we pray? As Don Whitney points out, if we just vent our hearts to God, with no structure, we may find prayer repetitive and lifeless because we will tend to pray for the same things all the time. Let's look at a proven method of prayer: praying Scripture.

Praying Scripture

God's people have been praying Scripture for about as long as they've had it. We hear the Psalmists address God, saying He is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," a quotation from Exodus 34. Jesus prayed Psalms 22 and 31 on the cross. When we pray Scripture, we can pray with variety while also having a frame for offering our desires to God.

The Psalms are a wonderful place to start in praying Scripture. Take Psalm 23, for example. It begins, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” What comes to mind as you read this? Well, say it back to God... and you’re now praying Scripture. This could provoke adoration: “Jesus, you’re such a good Shepherd, you’ve sacrificed your life to protect me from the tyranny of Satan and the penalty my sin deserves.” It could also provoke lament: “Lord, if you’re my shepherd, why do I feel so alone and exposed? Why do I have so many unmet needs?” It could provoke supplication: “Father, help me to trust your shepherding guidance and presence. I especially need it at work as I try to... at home when I need to... when my friends do...” It could also provoke intercession: “Father, as I read this, I think about (someone). They’re going through so much right now and need your care. Show Your shepherding grace in their life. Give them wisdom and guidance. Protect them from the danger they face...”

You can do this for every statement and petition in the Psalms. You can take as much (or as little) time as you can afford. When you come to statements that don’t fit you, pray for those for whom they do fit. When you come to Psalms that invoke violence on the wicked (called imprecatory Psalms), acknowledge this is what you deserve as a sinner apart from Christ, and this is what awaits all those who practice injustice. You can also pray these imprecations on your sin and the kingdom of Satan. As you pray the Psalms, you can be assured that your prayers resonate with the heart of God, because they are shaped by His Word.

Praying In Patterns

Praying ordered, intentional patterns is often helpful as well. For example, it is often useful to walk through various acronyms for prayer. There is the A.C.T.S. pattern of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. *Adoration* is acknowledging God’s greatness and his glory, rejoicing in the majesty of who he is and what he’s done. *Confession* is acknowledging the reality of who we are before God, telling the truth about

ourselves and carrying our burdens and sin before him, confident that he welcomes and accepts us on Christ's behalf. *Thanksgiving* is the inevitable overflow of the heart that has been forgiven and welcomed by grace. Scripture is filled with calls to catalog God's kindnesses and delight in his deliverances, thanking him for his tender care. *Supplication* is asking God to move in your life and the lives of others.

Another pattern that some Christians find useful is called "praying the hours." In this practice, you discipline yourself to pray in certain ways at specific times of the day. In the morning, at lunch, at the end of the workday, and before bed are great times to mark transitions in the day, cultivate attentiveness to God's presence and Word, and create space to commune with Him.

Praying Historic Prayers

Our faith is the faith that is "once delivered to all the saints" (Jude 3), meaning there is blessing for us in the preserved prayers of those who have gone before us. There are many written prayers available in books like the *Valley of Vision* and the *Book of Common Prayer*. Praying these prayers regularly will often expand your prayer vocabulary and add texture to your intercession.

Christians have also found it useful throughout the ages to end their days with the Prayer of Examen, which was developed by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century, as a way of prayerfully reviewing the day. The prayer begins with humbling yourself before God, acknowledging and thanking Him for his presence and keeping through another day. Second, pray briefly for light to see where God's been working during your day. Third, review the day's events, asking, "Where did I experience God's nearness and grace? Where did I experience anger or angst, joy or love? Why did I experience those things? Where is the Lord seeking me in those experiences?" Fourth, trust and receive God's grace anew for your failures of the day, asking for healing and grace to pursue

repentance wherever necessary. Finally, pray for renewal and ask for more grace for the day to come, leaving the prayer time by asking God for a soul at rest in his promises and eager for his provision in the day ahead.

As we pray, we get to take up our privilege as beloved children to come into the presence of our heavenly Father, who is eager and able to meet with us. The deeper we go in understanding this, the more we come to see that disciplined prayer is not only a practice to embrace, but a privilege to enjoy.

Next Step: What's a step you can take this week to commune with God more deeply in prayer? What decision can you make (on your calendar, in your home) to create space for prayer?

Chapter 4: Belonging to God's People

Belonging to God's people might seem at first more like a state of being than a practice to carry out. But ask yourself, "What does it mean to be a member of my family? A citizen of my country?" These questions get at what it means to belong to and identify with a group, and our belonging to groups affects the way we live. Our patterns of speaking, preferences for food, practices of relating, and a slew of other customs flow from the people to whom we belong and with whom we identify.

We practice belonging to God's people by relating to other Christians as fellow members of God's kingdom family. There are (at least) three lanes to walk in this path of belonging to God's people: corporate worship, mutuality, and hospitality.

Corporate Worship

Gathering with God's people for corporate worship is most critical way we practice belonging to God's people. When we sing, pray, hear the Word, and participate in the sacraments (the Lord's Supper and Baptism), we are singing the "national anthems" of the New Creation, pledging allegiance to the King of Kings, celebrating a national holy day, and eating a family meal. Whenever we can, we should avail ourselves of this opportunity.

Mutuality

Mutuality means regarding our identity, condition, and resources as being part of a greater whole. It's not a coincidence that Scripture often defines and describes the Church using metaphors of mutuality (living stones in a temple, members of a body, members of a family, citizens of a kingdom). This perspective cuts against the cultural "gospel" of middle-classism and upward mobility. In that false gospel, the good life is one of socioeconomic, emotional, physical, and spiritual independence and autonomy (literally, being a "law unto one's self"). This is one reason why it can feel strange and foreign for us to talk about our need for financial help or to confront sin in or confess sin to one another.

Practicing mutuality means asking this question: What would it look like if my home/budget/time/abilities/resources/friendship were not just for me and my biological family, but for my Kingdom family? We practice mutuality by pursuing intimacy with, generosity toward, and dependence upon one another.

Hospitality

Another way to practice belonging to God's people is through hospitality, (the Scriptural word is *philoxenia*, love of the stranger, or the "other"). Practicing hospitality often simply means stopping, seeing one another, feeling compassion for each other, and moving toward one another the way Jesus did in the Gospels. When we are willing to cultivate this ethic, we will find that we become a welcoming and hospitable presence in our relationships.

We practice hospitality by welcoming people, not just into our homes, but into our lives, and into our very hearts. We don't hold one another at arm's length, guarding our love. Like Jesus, we receive each person the Father brings. This means pursuing each

other in relationship, even outside of worship and community groups, seeking to be redemptively present in one another's lives.

What a gift it is to not only be saved from sin, but to be added into the family of God!

Next Step: What's a decision you can make this month to tangibly express the fact that you belong to God's people? Pursue membership at Four Oaks if you haven't yet? Prioritize gathered worship weekly? Invite someone over for hospitality?

Conclusion: Our Posture on the Path

Practicing these means of grace is less like performing a duty and more like taking steps on the road toward who God made and redeemed us to be. The journey may be long, and there may be fits and starts along the way. But we, like the Israelites who would sing the Psalms of Ascent on their way to Jerusalem to observe the feasts, are bound for the promised land. Our steps are ordered by adoration for who God is and expectation of how God is going to meet us not only at the destination, but on the journey as well.

Here are a few final recommendations regarding our posture on the path:

Be Present

Whether you are attending to God or people, seek to be fully present. You will get distracted. Your attention is finite, but that's okay. You can set yourself up to be present by removing as many distractions as possible. And when you falter, rather than scolding yourself for being unspiritual, think of every time you come back to being present as a "returning to God." You can't get mad at yourself for returning to God! And remember, it's the Prodigal God (as Timothy Keller calls Him) to whom you return, the God who gathers up his robe and sprints toward returning wanderers to meet and welcome them with the kiss of grace.

Be Realistic

Much of our inconsistency comes from trying to do too much at once. It's okay if you start small. Five minutes of meditation each day, along with five minutes of prayer, and a short conversation with a brother or sister in Christ each week can go a long way over a few months and years. For example, If you were to spend 5 minutes reading the same chapter of Scripture aloud every day, you'd probably have it memorized by the end of the month. Small and steady steps will lead to seismic shifts in your soul.

Be Authentic

As you come to the end of this field guide, take a deep breath. Rest in God's kindness to you. Remember that he is, as Dallas Willard says, "sensitive to the slightest move of the heart toward him."⁷ The real God is eager to meet with the real you in these habits of grace. And His grace is more than able to overcome any sins and failures that would hinder you as you walk with him.

Remember, we are *practicing* these disciplines. The point of practice is that you don't have to be perfect. The point is to train so that when the recital of life comes, loving God and neighbor become more and more reflexive and natural to us. If that's true, it means you don't have to meditate every time with laser focus or pray with snow-melting fervor in order for God to be present and active.

These are means of *grace*; and grace needs only our imperfection to do its work. Isn't that good news?

⁷ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 148.

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