

Legacy Leadership Collective / Spiritual Disciplines / Ignatian Gospel Contemplation

What is it?

- Centuries ago, Saint Ignatius of Loyola created a spiritual exercise that helps people *envision* themselves in the Gospel stories.
 - After having a powerful conversion experience, he wanted others to encounter God and be spiritually transformed. In his book, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, he walks people through this process. One of the steps is called Gospel Contemplation.
 - Others have referred to this as Ignatian reading or Ignatian praying.
 - Like The Prayer of Examen, Ignatius was focused on bringing his disciples (Jesuits) to a closer experiential knowledge of Jesus, not just technical know-how.
- Gospel Contemplation invites us to insert ourselves into the reading. This allows us to taste, see, smell, hear and feel what is going on in each scene.
 - We may envision ourselves as an onlooker or character in the scene, but our eyes aren't distracted from Jesus.
 - "Ignatian" meditation provides this possibility. Gospel meditation is "gazing" on Christ.
- As we engage our imagination we are able to spend time in Jesus's presence. This allows us to know Jesus more intimately, be led down our own path of discovery, and be transformed.
- Ignatius originally created this exercise as part of a retreat spanning several days, but it has been adapted in more recent years so people can practice it anywhere.
- When we look at building an intimate friendship with God, we must look at sharing experiences, which is what we do with any healthy friendship.
 - This is not what we'd commonly refer to as a "Bible Study," where we exercise the intellect, but more of a meditative reading where we exercise the imagination.
 - By entering a Gospel depiction where Jesus is interacting with others, we are able to flex and invite the Holy Spirit to shape our imagination as we "enter" the moment.
- This is helpful for people who structure their relationship mostly on what we "believe" while struggling with what they "experience."
 - Of course, with any meditative or contemplative discipline, *we never subjugate* what we believe under what we experience, but at the same time, belief alone won't build relationship - there must be experience.
 - As we've seen through this class, it's very possible to know many things "about" God without knowing God himself. This discipline attempts to be a remedy for such a problem.

"I often find that the details of my mental image of a scene are exclusively those suggested in the biblical account. I seem to have trouble letting the Spirit enrich the picture by adding other sensory details in the

way he does for others. But after I get past my frustrations and sense of failure, I realize that simply pondering the event - allowing myself to daydream on it - is sharing Jesus' experiences with him. I am, in fact, slowly moving into a new level of personal knowing of Jesus."¹

- STRUGGLE 1: It's easier for thoughts to wander in this discipline, but nothing to be frustrated with. God has fashioned our cognition in such a way that it follows progressions and associations. It's just how he made us, not something broken.
 - For instance, when thinking of the color blue for the sky in a parable, it reminds you that you need glass cleaner, which moves you to try and make a mental note, and then you remember that you have to leave a bit earlier so you can make it to the store.....
 - Just refresh. Write the distraction down to get it off your mind and keep your mind fluid, and return to the spiritual exercise.
- STRUGGLE 2: We may encounter is feeling like this exercise is a waste of time due to its seeming unproductive nature.
 - We typically judge moments by what "we get out of it" but yet never handle friendships in that manner. Productivity and efficiency miss the point in this exercise.
 - *"What God wants is simply our presence, even if it feels like a waste of potentially productive time. That's what friends do together - they waste time with each other. Simply being together is enough without expecting to 'get something' from the interaction."*²
- In Colossians 1, Paul says Jesus is "the image of the invisible God." So, when we share Jesus' experiences with Him, we in a way, see God in a more accessible way.
 - Spending time with Jesus by sharing Gospel moments "puts flesh" on God in a way our souls desperately want.

Practice

- Find a place of solitude and quiet and spend a minute flushing your attention span from the busyness of the moment.
- Pick a Gospel passage where Jesus is interacting with someone.
- Focus your heart and mind on the fact that God is present and your desire is to encounter God through your reading.
- Read the passage a couple times, becoming familiar with the story and its details.
- Picture the scene.
 - Where is it taking place?
 - Who is there?
 - What is Jesus doing?
 - What are the sights, sounds, smells?

¹ David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself; The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (IV Press, 2004) page 39

² Ibid

- What do you think Jesus' body language is saying? Is he smiling?
- Are you observing the scene as an outsider, or are you one of the characters?
- How do you feel?
- What do you think?
- The scene may come to life for you in vivid detail. Or you may enter into it through verbally describing what you see, contemplating people's words or actions.
 - Creativity and imagination can be helpful, but are not necessary for this exercise. The aim is to engage with the scene and gain a more personal knowledge of Jesus.
- As you conclude, take time to talk directly to Jesus. Speak whatever comes to your heart.