

ELEVATE: Living Life At The Highest Level

Session #4: Secretive Spirituality

Session Intro: One of the most important things we do in Youth Ministry is to teach the students how to build and maintain a spiritual life of their own. The day will come when they will graduate from University and they will no longer be able to feed from the giant trough of Youth Ministry. They will be adults and they will be expected to live the Christian life without quite as much help as they received in adolescence. Our job is to make sure they are ready for that day. Karen Tye, in her fabulous book *Basics of Christian Education*, suggests that part of our job is to teach students the skills they need to live and act out their faith. Today's session is targeted at that objective. As we turn our attention to Matthew 6:1-18 we discover Jesus teaching on the attitude and the practice of spirituality. In contrast to the hypocrisy of His day, Jesus taught a secretive spirituality. A sharp student in your group might ask why Jesus in Matthew 5:16 would tell his disciples to make sure that they are the 'light of the world' whose good deeds will be seen by all and then in Matthew 6 counsels a spirituality that cannot be seen by anyone. If you don't have any sharp students, then you needn't worry about this question. Just kidding! It might be helpful to remember that Jesus is making a distinction between good works (which should be public as a form of testimony) and religious devotion (which should be private to ward off pride and arrogance).

Session Objective: The objective of this session is to impart to students a correct understanding of the attitude and practice of spiritual devotion.

Minimum Prep: Read through the entire session outline. Prepare an environment where discussion can occur. This session assumes a front loading preamble in large group, a time of discovery and conversation in small groups, and finally a time of debrief and sharing as a large group at the end to share insights and learning.

Extended Prep: This session is designed with optional layers built in. You can use it in the way it is designed or you can customize it to reflect your group size or time constraints. To get the most out of this session, however you intend to do it, some advance prep is suggested. Consider having coloured highlighters on hand as well as extra pens. Set up three tables and place several chairs around each one. If you have additional adult leaders assign one to each table. Label one table: Prayer, another table: Bible Study, and the third: Fasting and Giving. Have photocopies of the correct handouts at each table. Have highlighters on each table. Also have white board paper and markers so that they can teach the group at the end what they learned.

Session Outline

Leader Preamble:

Have you ever sat by someone in church who sang really, really loud? So loud that you just know that they were really singing to you and to everyone around you instead of to God? Or have you ever heard someone pray with such big fancy words and sentences that you were sure even God was confused? Maybe you've even been that person once or twice! Sometimes in our worship or devotional times we get caught up in trying to be impressive before other people and we forget that it is God we are trying to connect with and not other people. In Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus tries to teach his disciples about the attitude and the practice of spiritual devotion. Just DOING it isn't enough. Jesus wants us to do it with the right attitude and for the right reasons. Tonight we are going to split up into three groups and spend about 30 minutes learning about the attitude and practice associated with one form of spiritual devotion. Then we are going to regroup here and share what we learned with one another. Let's go!

Leaders: This is when you stop your introduction and begin dividing them up into three groups. Handouts are provided for three groups but if you are too small to make use of three groups, then consider shortening the time frame for each and going through them all as one group. Another option would be to simply choose one per night and turn this one session plan into a three night mini-series where you deal with one of the three each evening.

Small Group #1: Prayer

Leader Note:

For a humorous beginning display these prayers by Homer Simpson on an overhead under the heading: Worst Prayers Ever:

Dear Lord, thank you for this microwave bounty, even though we don't deserve it. I mean... our kids are uncontrollable hellions. Pardon my French, but they act like savages! Did You see them at the picnic? Of course You did: You're everywhere, You're omnivorous. O Lord! Why did you spite me with this family?

Dear Lord, the gods have been good to me and I am thankful. For the first time in my life everything is absolutely perfect the way it is. So here's the deal: you freeze everything as it is and I won't ask for anything more. If that is OK, please give me absolutely no sign. (pause) OK, deal. In gratitude, I present you this offering of cookies and milk. If you want me to eat them for you, please give me no sign. (pause) Thy will be done. (eats food)

Take a few minutes and evaluate the prayers.

After you have introduced the topic continue by TESTING the students' knowledge of prayer. Ask them the following question and record the answers on white paper with a marker. "Let's brainstorm to see how much we already know about the ATTITUDE and PRACTICE of prayer. I'm going to divide this white paper into two columns. The left side I am going to label **Attitude** and the right side I am going to label **Practice**. Go ahead and call out what you already know about prayer." Record their suggestions and then proceed with the activity below.

Read Matthew 6:5-15 and consider the following questions.

- 1. Having read the passage in Matthew, what should we add to our collection of ideas about the ATTITUDE and PRACTICE of prayer?**

Leader Help: Some likely additions will include: prayer should be to God, not other people. Prayer should be in private so we are not tempted to be fancy. Prayer can be simple and succinct. God is not hard of hearing or slow to remember so we can probably just say things once. Prayer should be more than just a spiritual wish list. The Lord's Prayer is pretty balanced between praise, thanks, requests etc.

- 2. Compare the list of prayer topics below with the dissection of the Lord's Prayer. Try and draw lines between similar items. Work in pairs and explain your reasons to one another.**

Praise	Our Father in heaven, Holy is your name.
Thanksgiving	Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Confession of sin	Give us this day our daily bread.
Personal requests	Forgive us our trespasses
Prayer for the world	As we forgive those who trespass against us.
Prayer for friends	Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
Expression of dependence (This means saying to God: You are God and I am not and that's a good thing)	Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever, Amen

How are they similar? How are they different?

Leader help: *It's probably most important to get students to realise two things: 1) Prayer should be more than just a shopping list. 2) Having some sort of outline helps us remember to pray for others and to praise God for all He's done for us and to confess sin and so forth. The actual outline isn't the issue, as long as it takes us beyond ourselves and helps us focus primarily on God and others.*

- 3. Prayer is simple! Jesus said that in Matthew 6:7-8. So rather than spending the next 10 minutes pretending it's harder to pray than it is, let's spend the next 10 minutes praying. Pick one of the outlines above (either the Lord's Prayer or the other one) and pray through it. Assign one or two minutes to each item. If you need to prepare ahead of time (i.e. taking prayer requests) go ahead and do so.**

Leader help: The students may never have used the Lord's Prayer as an outline before but it's quite simple. Consider the chart below:

1. *Our Father who art in heaven. In this section you would prayer prayers thanking God for making us his children, for loving us and for making us each special and unique. You might also pray to God and acknowledge that He is in heaven and therefore He does not change like things to do on earth. Admit that He might know some things you don't because He sees things you do not.*
2. *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. A sample prayer in this section might go like this. "Father there is much in this world that is not as it should be. Where there are wars we pray for peace. Where there is hate we ask for Your love. Help us make this world more like You want it to be. Help us to show up for work every day as Kingdom bringers. Help us to remember to start with ourselves and our own attitudes. May Your will be done in us."*
3. *Give us this day our daily bread. This is the section for personal prayer requests.*
4. *Forgive us our trespasses. This is the section for confession.*
5. *As we forgive those who trespass against us. This is the section where you evaluate whether or not there are people you need to be reconciled to. A prayer in this section might go as follows: "Dear Lord help me to be a peacemaker. There is tension between me and Sally. Help me to forgive her for saying what she did about me. Help me to make things right between us so that we can honour You with our unity and kindness toward one another."*
6. *And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. A prayer in this section might go as follows: "Lord you know I struggle with gossip. It's so hard to know where the line is and I hate feeling out of the loop. Help me to care less about being 'inside' the cool circle and more about helping other people feel important and valued. Help me keep my big mouth shut at times and to know when to say nothing at all."*
7. *For Thine is the Kingdom. This is the section where you give praise to God for having all things within His grasp and you also recognise your dependence upon His grace. A prayer in this section might go as follows. "Dear Lord, you know how much these prayer requests mean to me, but I know You are not a puppet on a string. I will be patient and wait for Your timing. I know all things are Yours to grant but I also know that You see some things I don't see. You are God and I am not. Amen."*

When you are finished, be prepared to share what you learned with the wider group!

Small Group #2: Bible Study

*Leader Note: Begin this activity by TESTING the students' knowledge of Bible Study. Ask them the following question and record the answers on white paper with a marker. "Let's brainstorm to see how much we already know about the ATTITUDE and PRACTICE of Bible Study. I'm going to divide this white paper into two columns. The left side I am going to label **Attitude** and the right side I am going to label **Practice**. Go ahead and call out what you already know about Bible Study." Record their suggestions and then proceed with the activity below.*

Read John 15:4-5 and also James 1:22-25, and consider the following questions.

- 1. Having read the passages listed above, what should we add to our collection of ideas about the ATTITUDE and PRACTICE of Bible Study?**

Leader help: Expect some answers like: Bible Study should be about connecting to Jesus and learning from him, Bible Study should be about more than just hearing new ideas it should be about changing the way we live.

- 2. The best way to learn something is to do it with some guidance from someone else who has done it. Let's use James 1:19-27 as a sample passage. Go through the following exercise with your Small Group leader.**

Context: This is where you figure out how the passage you are reading fits in to the rest of the Bible and the rest of the book that you found it in. Doing this will prevent you from inventing a cult of your own. When you take verses out of context you can do all sorts of damage. So ask yourself: What is the book of James about? How does James 1:19-27 fit in? Record your answer below.

Leader help: Have some resources on hand to help. A good Study Bible will have most of what you need. Other resources might include a Handbook to the Bible. For this particular question the answer is pretty easy: James is a book written by the brother of Jesus and it tries to tell people the practical stuff about being a Christian.

It is low on theology (it only mentions the word 'Jesus' once) and high on practical Christian life advice. James 1:19-27 is kind of a summary of the whole book. It is almost like it is James' opening paragraph in an essay: it sets out all the stuff he's going to cover in greater length.

Big Idea: This is where you try and summarize the main idea of the passage. What does it mean? Sometimes there will be a verse that is really the Big Idea verse. You should highlight that verse and try and use the words of it in the answer you are going to record.

New Insights: Is there anything new in this passage that you really like? If so highlight it. Record any new insights below.

Application: James warns us to be doers of the word and not hearers only. Spend some time thinking about how your life could be changed to reflect the teachings of this verse. Record your thoughts below.

Memorization: Joshua 1:8 says: 'Do not let this book of the law depart from your mouth. Meditate on it day and night.' Pick a verse from the passage and memorize it.

Prayer: Bible Study without prayer is like cereal without the milk! Pray to God using the words of the passage and ask Him to help you begin to live out the truths of His word.

Be prepared to share what you learned about Bible Study with the rest of the group.

Small Group #3: Fasting and Giving

*Leader Note: Begin this activity by TESTING the students' knowledge of Fasting and Giving. Ask them the following question and record the answers on white paper with a marker. "Let's brainstorm to see how much we already know about the ATTITUDE and PRACTICE of Fasting and Giving. I'm going to divide this white paper into two columns. The left side I am going to label **Attitude** and the right side I am going to label **Practice**. Go ahead and call out what you already know about Fasting and Giving." Record their suggestions and then proceed with the activity below.*

Read Matthew 6:16-24 and consider the following questions.

- 1. Having read the passages listed above, what should we add to our collection of ideas about the ATTITUDE and PRACTICE of Fasting and Giving?**

Leader help: Expect some answers like: Fasting should be secret – no one should know. Fasting should be something we all do – ‘when you fast’. Giving should be about helping others, not bringing glory to you. It should be private and without fanfare. Leaders can expect questions like these: “Is fasting a requirement? How come nobody does it?” “Is it bad to post the names of all the big givers who gave money to the building project? How come we do it then?” Be prepared to answer honestly.

2. What is the purpose of fasting? What does it actually accomplish? Why would Jesus expect that we would be doing it?

Leader help: Richard Foster has some great teaching on this in his book Celebration of Discipline. In general a few things can be said: Fasting helps starve the flesh so that the spirit is in higher tune; fasting helps us identify with the poor and therefore wards off selfishness; fasting helps us concentrate on prayer.

3. Why is fasting so hard?

Leader help: Go past the obvious answer: “Cause I gets real hungry-like”. Probe deeper. Is it because we have so little self-control? Is it because we are used to having our wants satisfied immediately? This could lead to an expanded discussion of the potential benefits of fasting – it can “flex” our self control muscles, it can help us learn about delayed gratification etc.

4. It makes sense for the Bible to talk about prayer, Bible Study and fasting as spiritual disciplines, but why is giving included in this part of Jesus’ sermon? What does giving have to do with spiritual growth?

Leader help: Some of the insights your students came upon in the discussion about fasting will have immediate application here as well. Giving teaches us self-control, helps curb our natural selfishness, and can teach us about delayed gratification. In addition giving to others causes us to become dependent on God. Matthew 5:3 says that that is a good thing.

5. What experiences do you have with giving? How does it make you feel?

6. What should the balance be between responsible, regular giving and spontaneous, generous giving? Is it 50-50 or 70-30 or something else?

