

Cultivating Intimacy in Community: Spiritual Disciplines Practices in the Context of Community - Overview

Often when we think of cultivating intimacy with Christ, we immediately picture a solitary endeavor: an individual sitting alone reading or praying. Although independent activities are without a doubt part of developing a healthy understanding of who God is and delving deeper into our personal relationships with Christ, the hope of this module is to fill out students' pictures of "Christian Activity" to include collaborative activities as well.

In this module students will explore and be encouraged to practice some of the "Spiritual Disciplines" that tend to be more communal in nature, or at least lend themselves well to being practiced within community or alongside others. This module is designed to follow the module entitled **Individual Spiritual Disciplines**. At the very least, students in your group would benefit from having a little bit of knowledge and some previous experience with the spiritual disciplines in general before heading into this module.

Lesson 1: In Community

In this lesson students will reflect on their previous experiences with spiritual disciplines and consider the scriptural basis and practical benefits of engaging in spiritual disciplines. At the end they will be directed to practice at least one of them.

Lesson 2: Serving by Identifying the Needs of Others

In this lesson, students will be challenged to think about the needs of others by considering the story of Stephen and the early church leaders dealing with the practical difficulty of dispersing food equitably in their community found in Acts 6.

Lesson 3: Service as a Discipline

This lesson begins with a very fun but challenging activity that will introduce them to the difficulties of having to serve out of areas of weakness rather than strength. Students will then look at the story of the feeding of the 5000 found in Mark 6, being asked to consider some of the obstacles Jesus and the disciples may have had to overcome in order to serve those they encountered.

Lesson 4: **Celebration**

In this lesson, students will look at a few different celebrations found in Scripture and then consider what or who could be celebrated in their own lives. This lesson provides an excellent opportunity to do some celebrating as group, or to plan a future celebration.

Breathe

Module: CULTIVATING INTIMACY IN COMMUNITY

Lesson 1: COMMUNITY

Objectives:

- Students will discover the scriptural basis for spiritual community.
- Students will be able to articulate why practising spiritual disciplines in community is valuable.

Materials Needed

- ❑ A journal for each member of the group (see note below)
- ❑ 1 copy of Worksheet A for each group of 3-7 students
- ❑ An object with multiple pieces (e.g. Lego blocks, puzzle, etc.) OR a craft (e.g. a simple building model) with all appropriate tools

Leader's Note: Journals are a great way to get youth thinking before sharing, which often leads to a higher participation level in group discussion. I (Eric) work with a lot of neighbourhood youth and simply keep a bunch of journals in a big box. New kids start with a fairly simple (dollar store) one and then, once or twice a year, I invest in some nicer ones for the youth that have become “regulars”. While some youth aren't inclined to journal, a lot of them love it and some even choose to take their journals home with them to use throughout the week. If you want, a piece of lined paper could easily suffice, but I strongly encourage you to give journaling a try in your group. We will use them a few times during this module.

Minds On

Split your group into small groups of 3-4. Provide each group some of what is needed to complete the task (e.g. not all the pieces of the puzzle or only some of the required tools). Instruct them to accomplish as much as they can. (Depending on the size of your group, you could have each individual do this activity by themselves.)

Leader's Note: Do NOT specify in your instructions that they can only work within their small group. The intent is for them to discover that if they work together, they can accomplish the task.

After 2 min., if they haven't begun doing so, instruct them that they can share their resources together.

After they have completed the task, **ask:**

What was it like working on your project at first?

(If applicable) When did you realize you could work collaboratively?

Why was it so much easier once you began working together?

Action

Prompt: Richard Foster has described the spiritual disciplines as “the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us.” Although the spiritual disciplines are often considered to be independent activities only (prayer, meditation, fasting, etc.), I am sure that many of you have experienced God's blessing in the context of community in one way or another. We are going to explore that a bit further in smaller groups.

Divide into smaller groups of 3-5 students. Give each group 20 min. to complete Worksheet A together.

Consolidate/Debrief

After all groups have finished, have each group share their responses for Question 5 from Worksheet A.

Pray together as a group inviting the Holy Spirit to unite you as one community, asking for God to help you practice the disciplines together in a way that makes everyone feel safe, supported and encouraged.

Breathe In: Have students choose one spiritual discipline (it could be the same as their partner's discipline in "Breathe Out") to practise this coming week.

Breathe Out: Break into partners and have each set of partners choose one spiritual discipline to participate in this week (ex: meditation, fasting, simplicity). Encourage students to meet with their partner (in person, on the phone, text or online) to either a) practice it together or b) share and discuss your experiences with one another.

Leader's Note: You may choose to create space for this to happen before next week's session.

Worksheet A

Have everyone in the group answer questions 1 and 2 **in their journals**.
Then have group members share their answers out loud.

1. If you had a “favourite” spiritual discipline (either because you really enjoy it or simply find yourself practising it the most often) what would it be and why is it your favourite?

Some examples would be:

Prayer Meditation Solitude ServiceCelebration Worship

2. What is one way you believe you have benefited spiritually from this “favourite” discipline of yours?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-13 together.

Have everyone in the group answer questions 3 and 4 **in their journals**.
Have group members share their answers out loud and have one member of the group take notes.

3. Where have you seen examples of varying gifts such as wisdom, speaking in other languages, healing, etc. coming together to produce a richer sense of God’s presence?

4. Why do you think God doesn’t simply create us to be more similar?

Read and discuss question 5 together having one group member take notes.

5. So how could you see this happening with spiritual disciplines? Why would it be worthwhile to practise spiritual disciplines in community with others?

*If you have time, discuss the following:

In *The Spirit of Disciplines*, Dallas Willard writes, “Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence much better than scattered individuals. The fire of God kindles higher as the brands are heaped together and each is warmed by the other’s flame. The members of the body must be in contact if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other.”

What do you think of this quote?

Breathe

Module: CULTIVATING INTIMACY IN COMMUNITY

Lesson 2: SERVING BY SEEING

Objectives:

- Students will become better at identifying the needs of others.
- Students will begin working on meeting the needs of others in one of their various communities (home, school, and neighbourhood).

Materials Needed

- A journal for each member of the group
- Pens
- White/chalk board or chart paper
- Optional: “Minds On” questions posted on a large paper

Minds On

Think/Pair/Share: Have each person share with their partner their most recent experience at restaurant. Some specific questions for them to discuss are:

What was the name of your server? Were they good?

Did you enjoy their service? Why or why not?

What specifically made their service strong or weak?

After 3 min., have 3-4 students share their partner's answers.

Action

Prompt: Today we will be talking about serving others, and the first step in serving others is identifying a need. If you were a grade 12 student that wanted to serve a grade 9 student you could do so by offering to tutor them for math. However if that student is particularly strong in math or is not even taking math that semester your offer, although well intentioned, is not actually helpful. Sometimes when we as Christians attempt to help others we do not always do a good job of identifying what would truly be helpful

Hand out Journals.

Communicate the following instructions (this works well if they can be written on a white board, chalk board, etc. so that students can refer to it throughout the exercise without having to interrupt the entire group to do so):

For the next 5 min., read and answer the following questions in your journal.

Think carefully about each response remembering the goal of this exercise is to practice identifying the needs of others, not to simply create a personal wish list.

1. Write a list of 2 things that you know right now needs to get done at your house (e.g. washing the dishes).
2. Write down 2 things that could get done at your school that would bless your school community (e.g. having more supervision in the cafeteria).

3. Write down 2 things that could start happening in your neighbourhood that would make it a safer and/or more enjoyable place for people that live there.

Read together Acts 6:1-7. Alternately, have someone tell the story to the group (story-telling can be a very powerful medium for youth and this story lends itself well to story-telling).

Leader's Note: Another option would be to have youth read and act out this passage (it can utilize at least 21 people in 1 skit). It is short but has a lot happening and could easily be made quite funny. It would also be a break from sitting and reading/writing/listening for the more active members or your group.

Ask:

What was the need the early church leaders were trying to figure out how to meet?

(...distributing food fairly, regardless of race.)

How did they go about meeting this need? (...to place a small group of people in charge of serving and distributing food fairly.)

How did the people involved respond? (...it pleased everyone (verse 5))

How did the leaders help to ensure that the need was met well? (...it may not be noticeable right away but the names of the men put in charge are Greek names.)

Prompt (if applicable): The church leaders saw that the need was more than just getting food to people but the true need was having the food distributed fairly to everyone. By placing people that represented the party feeling discriminated against in charge of food distribution the leaders ensured that the Greeks would feel heard and confident their needs would be met. Furthermore, by having the Apostles place hands on the 7 it was clearly communicated to everyone that this decision was fully supported by the leaders and not a situation in which the Greeks were self-appointing themselves as an act of reaction or aggression. Thus, everyone was pleased.

Prompt: This story illustrates well the importance of fully and clearly identifying a need before trying to respond. Now let's return to the lists we made earlier.

Consolidate/Debrief

Have the group open their journals again to their previous responses. **Ask:**

Look at your answer to question one. Are these jobs that you usually do or jobs that someone else in your home typically does? If one of them is a job that you typically do replace it with a job that usually belongs to someone else. For question two and three, are your answers things that will benefit a large number of people or are they changes that you would enjoy seeing for personal interest sake? If one of your answers is primarily about your interests change it.

Breathe in: Invite students to look at their list and ask God to direct them towards one of the needs identified in at home, school, or in the community.

Breathe out: Have students choose one thing from their list and commit to begin working toward meeting that need. The solution might be simple: go home and do the dishes so that whoever usually has to gets a break. The solution might be complicated and take a lot of time and energy to accomplish. If it is a need at school or in their neighbourhood, encourage them to invite others to help think of good responses and join in the task.

Leader's Note: If your youth group is localized, from the same neighbourhood or divided among only 2 or 3 schools, it might work well to divide into neighbourhood or school groups and have people share the needs they have identified for the school or neighbourhood and then pray together and choose one need to begin working on as a group.

Breathe

Module: CULTIVATING INTIMACY IN COMMUNITY

Lesson 3: SERVING AS A DISCIPLE

Objectives:

- Students will identify the difference between serving as a discipline and serving out of our strengths.

Materials Needed

- A journal for each member of the group
- Pens
- A deck of cards (or necessary Lego) per group plus supplies for an example
- A copy of Worksheet B for each student

Minds On

Beforehand build a simple structure with playing cards with the numbers/face facing outwards. Place this 'model' in a separate room or screened off from everyone's view. A Lego structure can also be used if you prefer. Just be sure to have the right colours and sizes for each of the groups to use in their recreation.

Divide your group into teams of 3-5.

If groups of 3:

Have one person choose to be **Builder**: This is the only person that can actually touch the cards, but he/she cannot leave the building area, meaning they will never see the model and they cannot talk to the Visionary.

Have one person choose to be the **Visionary**: This is the only person (if playing with only 3/team) that will get to see the model, but they may not enter the building area, meaning they will not get to see what the Builder is building and they cannot talk to the Builder.

Have one person choose to be the **Communicator**: This person has to stay in an in-between zone. They cannot see the model or the building being built. However they can talk to both the Builder and the Visionary.

If groups of 4:

In addition to the 3 roles above,

Have one person choose to be the **Yes/No**: This person can go anywhere, they can see both the model and the building being built but they cannot touch the cards and they cannot say anything except the words 'yes' and 'no'

If groups of 5:

Have one person choose to be the **Encourager**: This person cannot touch the cards but they can go anywhere and see the model and can talk to anyone. But they cannot give any

information to anyone verbally or non-verbally. They are simply there to be positive and encouraging.

Have each group recreate an identical replica of the model. The cards must be identical in number and suit and being facing exactly the right direction. (If using Lego then the right colours and right size pieces, etc.)

Leader's Note: This game is usually tougher than expected and if group is younger they tend to get pretty frustrated.

After they have played for a sufficient amount of time or one team has been successful, bring them together.

Ask:

How did the Builders feel during the game? The Visionaries? And so on...

How did your group work at overcoming obstacles it encountered along the way?

How did you choose who took on which role?

Did anyone have to take on a role they really didn't want to? If so, how did that go?

How did that person feel during the game?

Action

Prompt: Often when we look for opportunities to serve, we look to serve in areas that we enjoy or feel we can naturally do well. This is sometimes referred to as 'serving out of our strengths'. If we like spending time with children we might offer to baby-sit or volunteer in the church nursery. If we are good at singing we might volunteer to sing at a senior's home or sign up to be on the church or youth worship team. There is absolutely nothing wrong with serving others with our gifts, in fact starting with things we enjoy and tasks we are confident in is often a great place to begin serving. But there is more to the discipline of service than just doing what we enjoy or are good at. As Dallas Willard,

author of The Spirit of the Disciplines, puts it, “I will often be able to serve another simply as an act of love and righteousness, without regard to how it may enhance my abilities to follow Christ. There certainly is nothing wrong with that...but I may also serve another to train myself away from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment, or covetousness. In that case, my service is undertaken as a discipline for the spiritual life.”

Sometimes we serve others not because we especially want to, but because we are called to do so as a way of being obedient to Christ. Let’s look at a passage where Jesus and his disciples end up being called into service.

Leader’s Note: It could very helpful for you to add some illustrations from your own life.

Hand out Worksheet B to each student and, if you have been using journals throughout the module, hand them out to students at this time as well and invite them to record their answers there, rather than on the sheet.

This worksheet is to be done individually and then thoughts will be shared after. (You may want to have some background music playing to help break silence.) Give them 10 min. to complete the worksheet.

Consolidate/Debrief

When your students are finished, gather them together again as a group and **ask:**

Do you think Jesus and his disciples wanted to do everything they did in this story?

Why or why not?

Why do you think they did it anyways?

Prompt: Sometimes when faced with opportunities to serve others, we feel guilty about not wanting to. Take comfort in the fact that this is not uncommon and in the knowledge

that in moments like this, it is less about what we feel and more about what we do. In serving others, we discover the freedom to do things because we know we should without worrying about whether or not we want to. As we practice this discipline we might find that our desire to serve others increases.

Breathe in: Do you ever feel guilty about not wanting to help others? Ask God to forgive you those times in your past and ask him to help make you more obedient during opportunities to serve others in the future.

Breathe out: Be prepared and on the lookout this week to help out in at least one situation that you don't really want to, or by having to do something you don't really enjoy doing or are not very good at.

Cultivating Intimacy in Community: Worksheet B

INDIVIDUALLY:

Before you begin, it might be helpful to know that prior to this passage Jesus had sent out the 12 disciples in pairs to preach and do miracles (Mark 6:7-13) and John the Baptist, a close friend and relative of Jesus, had been executed. (Mark 7:14-29).

Read Mark 6:30-44 on your own and answer the follow questions.

In what big way did Jesus and his disciples serve the large crowd in this story?

Did they want to feed all these people?

Support your answer with examples from the passage.

Did they have good and legitimate reasons for not wanting to be with other people, let alone serve them to the extent they did? If yes, what were they? If no, why not?

Why do you think Jesus listened, spoke, and gave food to these people?

Breathe

Module: CULTIVATING INTIMACY IN COMMUNITY

Lesson 4: CELEBRATION

Objectives:

- Students will identify reasons for celebrating.
- Students will learn how to celebrate well when the opportunity arises.

Materials Needed

- A journal for each member of the group
- Pens

Minds On

Ask everyone to close their eyes and picture a celebration they have been at, either recently or that they remember as being really great.

Ask: What do you see?

What can you hear?

Do you smell anything?

Is there anything to touch or taste?

How do you feel?

After everyone has had time to consider these things, have students quickly break into groups of 3 and share their answers. After all have shared, ask if there were any elements that were common to everyone in the group?

Action

Prompt: Jesus' life begins with joyous celebration: "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.'" (Luke 2:10) And Jesus spoke about joy even towards the very end of his life: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11). Joy is clearly something that is important to the story of scripture and to Jesus himself. The church does not always do a great job of focusing on joy and celebration, but hopefully we can change some of that together!

Break into small groups of 3-7 students per group. Give one of the following passages to each group to read and study:

- Exodus 15:19-21 (If you only have one group I would recommend using this one)
- 2 Samuel 6:12-23
- Psalm 150 (If you only have 2 groups I would suggest not doing this one)

Each group can answer the same questions together after reading their passage, so you may want to have them displayed in some way:

What sort of celebrating is happening in this passage?

What reason, if any, is given for celebrating?

How do others in the story respond to the person(s) celebrating?

How do you think you might respond to this celebration if you were witnessing it?

How do you think this celebration might go over in your church?

Come back together into one big group (if you are a large gathering you could have 3 groups meet, one of each, rather than all meeting together), and have a spokesperson from each group share briefly what occurred in the passage his or his group read.

Ask:

What reasons are presented in the Bible for celebrating?

Do you take opportunities to celebrate each week? month? day?

If you were to celebrate on your own what might you do? What about in a group?

Why do you think celebrating is important?

Prompt (if applicable): God wants us to know that He loves each of us. He wants us to see the ways that he is demonstrating this and he wants us to be filled with joy as Jesus says in John 15:10, not with sadness and fear and guilt. The discipline of celebration teaches us to take stock of what we can be thankful for, and then give God praise in response. God longs to turn our mourning into dancing, our lunch breaks and coffee breaks into thanksgiving and praise breaks. The discipline of celebration reminds that God is present and active in our lives, and helps us to physically and emotionally respond to that joyous reality, teaching us to remind others of this same truth in their own lives.

Consolidate/Debrief

Hand out journals. Write on a white board, chalk board, chart paper, etc. the following questions and invite students to answer them in their journals:

What is one thing that God has done in your life recently that you could celebrate?

What is one thing that someone you know has accomplished that you could celebrate with them?

Why should we bother to celebrate?

While students still have their journals, ask them to consider the following questions:

Breathe in: Are you celebrating God? Are you experiencing joy in your life?

Breathe out: How are you going to celebrate this week?

Leader's Note: If it seems and appropriate (and practical), consider ending with a time of celebration. Maybe singing together as a group or having some snacks or playing some games...something distinct from your group's typical "youth night"

And/Or:

Consider planning a celebration together for the church or for someone particular in your group or church for God (a concert of celebration where individuals bring forth stories, music, art, etc. in celebration of God can be an amazing and moving time together for a youth group).