

I invite you to pull out your insert in your bulletin that looks like this. We are in the middle of a series on six spiritual practices that help us to follow God. You will see these practices listed on this page. But if you are good at math you may have picked up on something right away. There are not 6 items listed here. There are 7.

That is because as I continued to work on this series I realized that I was leaving out one very important practice that is clearly in the Scriptures that is important. And it is something that many of us do not pay enough attention to. The fact that I overlooked it may be saying something about me that I need to hear. This spiritual practice was observed by God as God created the world. The 7th spiritual practice to help us to follow God that I left off the original list is the spiritual practice of rest.

So the six part series on spiritual practices that help us to follow God is now a seven part series. And that is ok because 7 is a very biblical number. 7 is a number which symbolizes wholeness and completion. There were 7 days of creation. 7 is a number of completion and wholeness.

You will see on this handout the 7 practices that we are being invited to discover and focus in on in our lives that help us to grow closer to following God the way God yearns for us to follow. These spiritual practices are the practices of worship, study, fellowship with other Christians, prayer, serving others, healthy living, and, as I just shared, rest or Sabbath.

I also discovered something else this week in my studies. Seeking to follow spiritual practices in these 7 areas reconnects us to the early practices of the church. In the early monasteries of the Christian Church, the earliest monks developed what they called "Rules of Life." These were rules that they developed to help them stay true to their spiritual foundations. These were the rules that they developed to help them stay connected to God and God's will for their lives.

The most famous of these rules of life were developed in the 6th century by St. Benedict. The “Rules of Benedict” as they were called. Now Benedict came up with an extensive list of rules. 73 chapters of rules in fact. Focusing on 7 may be a much simpler task. But these rules that St. Benedict developed were created by him to help the monks in that order to find practical ways to live out their calling as Christians.

So I invite you to look over this sheet with me. What you are invited to do is to look over this list of 7 practices and to begin to think about setting goals for yourself in each of these areas. For instance, in the area of worship, your goal may be a commitment to attend corporate worship at least once a week.

Your goal may be to spend a certain amount of time each week walking through God’s creation and soaking in God’s presence in some way. Walking through God’s creation with a focus on seeking God is one form of worshipping God. It’s not the only way. We need to be a part of corporate worship but worship must also be a part of our private journey with God.

In the area of prayer, you may set a goal to set aside a specific time to pray each day. You may set a goal of learning a new way to pray. When we study prayer next week we will explore some different forms of prayer. Or you may be like me and you are not someone who responds well to rigidity. For me, I have a Bible verse and 3 devotionals that come to me via email.

Those social media devotionals and verses are my reminder to lift up my prayers to God and to meditate. I also have on my smartphone several world locations under my world clock. This is my reminder to remember in prayer people in these particular places.

Some locations I know specific people living and serving there. I have Monrovia, Liberia on my phone to remind me to lift up prayers for Rev. Peter Breeze and the people battling Ebola. I have Beirut, Lebanon on my phone to remind me to pray for my friend Edgar McCall who will be spending three months there beginning this week.

So what I invite you to do is to begin to look over this list and begin to make specific goals for yourself. In our time for Christian Education the adults will have some time to begin this process of goal setting. We will keep referring to these goals throughout these next few weeks. We will keep referring to these goals because we will be invited to keep one another accountable to these goals that we are beginning today to set for ourselves.

I am also going to start to encourage us as a congregation to be very intentional about what we do as a congregation. I am going to encourage us to keep these 7 practices in focus as we move forward as a congregation. As we as a congregation seek to become better followers of what God is leading us to become as a corporate body.

In these 7 spiritual practices, today we are lifting up the spiritual practice of study. I want to share with you some words which I came across on a blog this week. A blog is like an internet diary for anyone who has a real life and doesn't spend time on social media. Here these words of this woman who shares her own struggle with reading the Bible.

In her blog, Heather Carili writes about the night that she stopped reading the Bible. In her words she says, "I was on the faded green easy chair in my bedroom. Every night as the light faded from white to yellow to gold, I would open the Word and read.

In college, reading the Bible was an OCD coping mechanism, a way I proved my worth and checked off the box that I was a “Good Christian.” As a young mother with not enough sleep, I tried not to worry if I didn’t read Scripture every day. I was trying to be gentle with myself.

That night though, I hesitated before I opened up the Good Book. Reading those numbered, cross-referenced and paper-thin words, my heart felt like it was getting shredded. I didn’t want to face what it meant. A Christian who couldn’t read her *Bible*? Isn’t that an oxymoron?

So I kept going. Kept going and going. I thought stopping might mean I’d lost my faith. Besides, I said to myself, perhaps my hesitation was *normal*.”

Carili continues her blog post by saying, “I knew I was in good company when I winced through the genocides in the first five books of the Bible. Leviticus was a hard sell, but the rules about women were outdated, weren’t they? And later, when the smiting started in Ezekiel, I skimmed over the passages, thinking *Jesus Jesus Jesus*, because he’s a good answer to any question.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I got to the New Testament. Now we were out of the woods. Except—except— Even Jesus was hard to read. *Jesus*. She read these words from him,

“You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”

Carilli then shares these words, “That day in the green chair, I watched the light go grey. I stared at the fading wall, Christ’s words going through my head. *How long shall I put up with you? Jesus really said this?*

“I closed the Bible,” she says. I set it on the little table next to my chair, and I crumpled inside. I decided then and there that I had to stop. No: I had to face that reading the Word was shredding my heart.

I wonder how many of us have taken reading the Bible so seriously that we have come to a point when we have decided that we cannot read it anymore. I wonder how many of us have come to a point when reading the Bible has so unsettled us that we cannot read it anymore?

My hunch is that very few of us have come to that point. That is because in our society we are encouraged to not take the Bible too seriously. In many ways we have watered down the Bible into a self help book that makes us feel good about ourselves. We only want enough of the Bible to soothe our soul but we don't want to take it so seriously that it unsettles us.

Today I am going to encourage us to begin to allow ourselves to be unsettled by the Bible. To read it so seriously that it causes us to question some of our deepest held assumptions about ourselves, about God, and about the world we live in.

Much of what we see in the world today when it comes to biblical teaching is pretty fluffy. But I encourage us to follow the example of St. Benedict and take reading the Bible very seriously. Let it shape us and mold us. Let it really challenge our assumptions.

Today you are invited to remain and have lunch here today at noon. We have some delicious barbeque prepared for today as well as some sides and some ice cream to eat. We are going to talk some about the Kerygma study which we are beginning here. Kerygma is a more intensive study that we will be offering.

I hope that we have several folks who will begin the process or continue the process to be open to how the Bible can challenge some assumptions you may have. Hopefully we will begin to study the Bible more seriously and begin to move into asking deeper and more challenging questions than we may be currently asking.

Blessings upon you as we seek to continue to become stronger followers of God by studying God's Word. Can I hear an Amen to that? AMEN.

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-Caliri, Heather, <http://shelovesmagazine.com/2014/bible-shredded-heart/>

-<http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/our-rule-of-life/what-is-a-rule-of-life/>

-Text: 2 Timothy 3: 10-17

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