



PORTRAIT

Re-presenting Christ in Our City

Spiritual Practices & Small Group Resources

Why a Portrait?

We live in a time when the prevailing notions of who Jesus Christ is are largely distorted. The real portrait of Jesus can't be seen because of the cultural layers of religion that hide God's, and hence Christianity's, true character.

It is our joy and responsibility to continue growing as disciples, asking God to tear away that which distorts so our city may see Christ with greater clarity.

How to Use This Booklet

This booklet consists of spiritual practices and small group resources to accompany the "Portrait" sermon series this fall 2019 at Bethany Community Church. For each week, there is a practice for you to engage with the sermon series in your daily life. All but one of the practices are recommended to engage with on your own. However, it can be helpful to connect with others in your community and debrief your experiences together. The small group resources include a Scripture passage thematically linked to the week's sermon.

Note: The questions for the small group portion are adapted from work by Darrell Guder.

WEEK ONE

Distortion: Gospel is about eternal destiny

Truth: Gospel is about wholeness

SMALL GROUP • JOHN 10:1-21

CONTEXT: How does this text *read* us and our world?

There has been considerable emphasis in recent years on what the reader brings to the text, and on the reader as interpreter of the text. This question reverses the logic by **NOT** asking how we read the text, given our assumptions, but rather, considering how the text reads us and our assumptions.

- What does this text have to say about us, our assumptions, our values, our culture, and our world?
- How do we see ourselves if Scripture is the story of God and His truthful dealings with the world? How do we locate ourselves within this story?

GOSPEL: How does this text *bring* us good news?

All of Scripture is the story of God's Good News, and that the Gospel principles of God's initiative in grace to bring all nations under the reign of God permeates both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. This means that we should find Good News in the whole Bible, day after day, week after week.

- The Bible speaks the Good News of Jesus in every page. Where do we see the Good News in this passage?

CHANGE: How does this text *convert* us in personal and corporate life?

Christians are called to ongoing transformation as disciples. Some writings use the metaphor of "continuing conversion" to speak of this process of change, both personally and as a community.

- How does this text call our community—and our unique calling in ministry together—to continue to be converted to the Gospel?

MISSION: How does this text *send* us and *equip* our witness?

The Bible is a text designed for the purpose of forming communities for mission, and assumes that God is a missional God who calls and empowers a people to Himself so that they would be His witnesses. The Gospel sends us, as individuals and communities, to be witnesses in word and deed—and that to be equipped for this task, we need to be transformed by the Gospel.

- Based on this text, who or what may be coming into focus as an unrealized mission or outreach opportunity?

FUTURE: How does this text *orient* us to God’s Kingdom?

Central to God’s mission is the establishment of His Kingdom, a righteous rule that establishes reconciliation, justice and peace. The Kingdom is already underway but not yet consummated. God’s people are already participants in the distinctive ways of the Kingdom, and will become partakers of its full expression in God’s time.

- How does this text help us see what will be in God’s Kingdom—what He desires, but has not yet arrived in fullness?

PRACTICE

Prayer of Examen

The prayer of examen is a way to seek out the work of God in every part of your life. His presence brings wholeness to every aspect of your life. Start by closing your eyes, quieting down, and taking a few deep breaths. Now, think back through your day, starting with the moment you woke up till this moment now. Recall as much as you can, almost as if you were watching a highlights reel of your day. Pay attention to your reactions and responses. Notice what emotions came up for you throughout the day.

Consider these questions:

- When did I experience God being the most present with me during the day?
- When did I experience God being the least present?

Talk to God about your experience of Him today. Your experience may differ from your hopes or expectations. Talk to Him about this. Remember, God is not shocked by your honesty. He knows and understands you completely and invites you to be open with Him.

Close your time once more in silence, this time listening for God. Allow Him space to speak into your day.

WEEK TWO

Distortion: Christianity is based on us/them conquest mentality

Truth: Gospel brings people together and serves all

SMALL GROUP • LUKE 10:25-37

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PRACTICE

Feasting

The author in Psalm 34:8 encourages us to “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” A great way to experience God’s goodness is through the discipline of feasting. Yes, you heard me correctly: feasting.

Feasting is not about excess as much as it is about celebrating and savoring. God has created food for our nourishment and enjoyment. In Biblical times, feasts were special times to celebrate rites of passage, such as marriage, but also to commemorate moments when God intervened in mighty ways. Feasts are also ways to bring together people who might never meet up under other circumstances. Feasts bring us together.

For this practice, gather a few friends or the people in your small group for a feast. You don’t have to serve food that is expensive, but take some time to set the table intentionally, make food that requires more effort than your regular meals, and identify something you want to celebrate with your guests. Don’t rush through this meal. Take your time to be present in this place, with these people, and notice what you’re eating. Compliment the chef and share about which foods are especially enjoyable for you. Each person can share what they are grateful for in that moment and the group can respond by raising their glass to join in on the celebration and gratitude.

As the meal winds down, reflect on the following questions:

- What was it like to practice feasting? What was uncomfortable? What was joyful?
- What was the highlight of the feast? What was frustrating or challenging for you?
- How did you experience God as you feasted?
- Is God offering any invitations to you in regards to your practice of feasting?

WEEK THREE

Distortion: God's anger is retributive, spiteful, and destructive

Truth: God's anger is an expression of God's love

SMALL GROUP • MATTHEW 21:12-13

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PRACTICE

Breath Prayer

Our breath is constant. We don't notice our breathing until it's interrupted or changed. If we stop breathing, we cannot live. Similarly, we find life in God vital. As Acts 17:28 (NIV) reminds us, "For in him we live and move and have our being."

There are many ways to engage in prayer, but in Breath prayers, we simplify our prayers to a few words or a phrase, and speak them with the rhythm of our breathing. It is a simple, but profound way to look to God for our sustenance and survival. You can use small selections from Scripture, or other written prayers, such as The Jesus Prayer, to structure your breath prayers.

Begin by closing your eyes (it's helpful to focus and prevent distractions), and start to breathe in and out slowly. Once you find a slow and steady rhythm of breathing, begin to speak these words quietly or out loud:

Breath In: You are my advocate Jesus

Breath Out: Your love holds me

Keep doing this for 3-5 minutes. It may be helpful to set a timer so that you don't worry about the clock. When you finish, take a few minutes to reflect on your experience:

- What was it like to practice this way of praying? Was it easy? What is challenging?
- How did you experience God as loving you in this time of prayer? Did you experience Him as angry?
- Spend a few minutes talking to God about your experience. Allow space for Him to respond to you.
- Is this something that would be helpful to include in your prayer life? If so, what might be a helpful way to start this practice?

WEEK FOUR

Distortion: God is unjust and unmerciful

Truth: God is the perfect blend of justice and mercy

SMALL GROUP • JOHN 8:1-11

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PRACTICE

Paying Attention to Place

Knowing our place evokes our imagination for another future. The future God intends has the power to restore injustice and evoke enduring beauty. Every place and its story has a purpose and gift to offer the world. We are part of that story. Thus, paying attention to the particularities of our place, is an essential part of the story of restoration in which we participate.

Take a drive or a walk through your neighborhood. If able, consider taking the bus for this practice. As you go, pay specific attention to these four areas:

1. *Structures*

What are the actual structures that exist in your neighborhood? What kinds of people are they built for? What is their purpose? Are structures older, newer, run-down? Are there fences bars or walls?

2. *Signs*

What is written or painted in your neighborhood that tells a greater story than we are often conscious of? Are there themes to the signs you see in your neighborhood? Who are they catering to and for what purpose? Did it cost money to make this statement or advertisement? What are the dominant languages used, values communicated and affiliations represented through these signs?

3. *Spatial Dynamics*

The spatial layout of any environment can foster relational interaction or snuff it out. Does your neighborhood communicate hospitality, privacy or self-protection? Are there wide open spaces? Is it easily walkable or bike friendly? As a resident of the neighborhood, in what way is your own sense of relational connectedness dependent on this place?

4. *Social Interaction*

Are there pedestrians? If so, are they walking for leisure? Walking pets? Or are they headed somewhere? When walkers pass each other do they greet one-another? Are the people on the streets locals or visitors? Where do people hang out?

Question for Reflection: After paying attention to your place, what is one way you see the restoration of God at work? What is one area of needed restoration where you might join in God's work?

WEEK FIVE

Distortion: God is anti-pleasure (food, money, sex, possessions, etc.)

Truth: God is the source of all pleasure

SMALL GROUP • JOHN 2:1-11

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PRACTICE

Gratitude

Block out an hour in your schedule this week and do something you really enjoy. Go for a bike ride. Buy a doughnut from your favorite local spot. Read a book for pleasure. Take a nap. As you engage in this activity, pay attention to the thoughts and feelings that surface for you. What about this experience gives you great joy? Are you freely and easily able to enjoy this activity? Are there voices of dissent or shame telling you that you should be somewhere else?

When you've completed the activity take 5-10 minutes and write down a prayer of gratitude thanking God for the time. As you pray, consider the attributes of God that are revealed through the gifts God offers. List these attributes as part of your gratitude prayer.

As you finish the exercise spend a moment reflecting on the following questions:

- How often do you take time to offer God thanks? How might a regular routine of gratitude deepen your connection with God?
- Are there activities that bring you pleasure that you might consider participating in more regularly? Perhaps weekly or monthly? What would it look like to engage in these activities in a healthy, God-centered way? How might these activities be doorways for gratitude in your life?

WEEK SIX

Distortion: God is known ONLY through the Bible

Truth: Christ is the source of all truth

SMALL GROUP • PSALM 19

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PRACTICE

Nature Time

You cannot go into creation without seeing an expression of the creator; it's Jesus' handiwork. The medieval church said there are two great books of God; the Books of Scripture and the Book of Creation. Psalm 19 is a lovely Psalm that focuses on both creation and scripture as reflecting God's glory.

Take time this week to walk or hike through nature. If walking is difficult situate yourself somewhere outside. As you begin your walk, reflect on these words from Psalm 19:

**The heavens declare the glory of God,
And the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
The heavens declare the glory of God,
And the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
And night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words,
Whose voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world.
Psalm 19:1-4**

As you walk or sit, observe creation around you. What do you see? What do you smell? What colors are your eyes drawn towards? Consider what the creation you are seeing reflects about God's character. What can we know about God through his creation? How does viewing this creation as God's revelation change how we care for creation?

Close your time by re-reading Psalm 19:1-4.

WEEK SEVEN

Distortion: The Gospel is a verbal and intellectual affirmation of beliefs

Truth: The Gospel is a person to be embodied

SMALL GROUP • JOHN 9:13-34

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PRACTICE

Prayer Walk

You cannot go into creation without seeing an expression of the creator; There are many different ways to engage in a prayer walk. Today's walk will be about noticing your surroundings with God. Start by walking, although if you're prone to speed walking, intentionally take a slower pace. As you walk slower, you can take in the sights and sounds and smells around you in deeper ways. Pay attention to what you see, what you hear, and what you smell.

Talk to God about what you're experiencing. Ask what He'd like you to notice as you walk. Let this lead you into prayer for your community, and prayers of thankfulness for God's creation and the creativity of others.

WEEK EIGHT

Distortion: Christianity protects us from Suffering

Truth: God is our companion in Darkness

SMALL GROUP • JOHN 11:17-37

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PRACTICE

Imaginative Contemplation

Read through Psalm 23 a couple of times slowly. Now, close your eyes and imagine that you are in the midst of green pastures. Take a look around. What do you see? What do you smell? What do you feel? Is the grass soft, or maybe it's rough under your feet? What's the weather like?

What is it like for you to be in this pasture? Does it feel restful? Does it feel stressful? Do you want to be here, or is there a long list of things you should be doing? However you show up, know that you are welcomed.

The Lord approaches, taking you on a tour of the neighboring stream. Maybe you dip your toes in the water. Is the water cool or warm?

Now the road turns towards a dark valley, but Jesus is close by. What is it like to have him so near as you walk into this ominous valley?

The valley eventually opens up and you arrive at a feast. Pay attention to what's on the table. What smells waft your way? Who is at the table with you? What does it feel like to arrive at this lavish meal that is just for you?

Jesus approaches and anoints you - yes you - and refills your cup till it spills over. What is your response to Him? Perhaps you feel humbled, or grateful, or joyful, or deeply loved. Take a moment to respond to Jesus.

Close by giving thanks to the One who is present with you in both moments of joy and delight, and moments of fear and sorrow.

WEEK NINE

Distortion: Faith leads to anxiety

Truth: Those who are rooted and grounded in love are able to move towards peace.

SMALL GROUP • JOHN 14:25-27

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PRACTICE

Affirmations

Far too often the “good news” of the Christian gospel begins with a fear-inspired message: you are a deprived sinner bound for hell unless you call on God to save you. This framing often leads a person to experience greater levels of fear and anxiety instead of peace, rest and joy. Sadly, this approach to the Christian story misses Genesis 1, where God created humankind in God’s image and calls them “very good” (Genesis 1:27 & 31).

In addition to fear-based gospel approach, there are plenty of cultural messages we receive everyday that challenge the original goodness and inherent value God placed within us. These messages come in a variety of forms, but ultimately communicate we are somehow not enough. Often these messages are unconsciously consumed, and thus evolve into a general, pervasive anxiety that is always with us, causing us to question our worthiness.

The practice of affirmations is an intentional and conscious way of reminding ourselves of our truest identity as children of the creator God, made in God’s image and loved deeply.

As you prepare for this practice, find a quiet space where you can experience ten minutes of uninterrupted time. Assume a comfortable position and take 30 seconds to a minute to simply be in the silence. Pay attention to your breathing.

Begin reading through the following list of affirmations. Read them aloud and slowly. Read through the list three times, pausing between each verse and considering the depth of each statement.

I am a child of God; God knows me. (1 John 3:1)

My life is rooted and grounded in the love of God. (Ephesians 3:17)

God knew me and loved me before I came into being (Psalm 139)

I am a recipient of God’s peace. (John 14:27)

I cannot be separated from God’s love. (Romans 8:35-37)

God is for me and nothing can change that. (Romans 8:31)

My life has purpose and meaning. (Ephesians 2:10)

When I am weak, God is working. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

I am chosen by God and I no longer live in darkness. (1 Peter 2:9)

Close this practice with a short prayer, asking God to remind you of these truths as you go about your day. If there was one affirmation that was especially meaningful for you, take a moment to write it down or commit it to memory? Pray that God would bring that affirmation to mind as you go about your day.

NOTES

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