Session 9: Abiding in Christ

(The 'How' of Discipleship 4)

Head Heart Hands

RELATIONAL	*"Christians grow through committed relationships of safety, encouragement and challenge"*
PRACTICAL	*"Christians grow as we continue to choose to lay down our will for the sake of God's".*
ACTIVATED	*"Christians grow when we put into practice new ideas and teaching we gain, often from the invitation of others".*

Session Aims

- Understanding how Christian spiritual disciplines and practices help us develop/maintain a close relationship with God.
- Review our own rhythm of spiritual practices and disciplines & consider how we might develop this.
- To explore how we create a rule or rhythm of life - the value of it, the challenges, and how to begin.
- To explore how to support and enable others to engage in spiritual disciplines and practices in their lives - including awareness of misunderstandings of them.

Key Bible Passage

John 15.1-17

Main Session Content

Introduction

- We talk about 'abiding' in Christ in different ways – sometimes it's about 'being' as opposed to 'doing' (Rowan Williams); sometimes the 'doing' can be part of how we abide/build a whole-life friendship with God.

Abiding in Christ is about Love in Action

- Love isn't just a feeling but shown in action. This applies to our relationship with God too.
- If the goal of the Christian life is God (walking with God, growing closer to God, living out God's calling and ways), spiritual disciplines and practices are what keep us orientated to God, growing in the right direction.
- Spiritual practices and disciplines have two main purposes for Christians:

Space for your notes…

1) to help us stay close/move closer to God throughout the whole of life;

2) to help us re-order our loves, desires and priorities away from what is harmful/sinful, and towards what is good ('they put us where God can work within us and transform us' - Richard Foster).

- They're meant to transform us (sometimes counter-culturally) - not just help us feel better about life.

John 15.1-17 - The Vine and the Branches:

- Jesus is the true vine/life source for us 'branches'; it's through this that we live the Kingdom life.

- Being attached to the same vine means we're in relationship with other Christians too.

- We grow in unique ways (but attached to the one vine).

- But we are also pruned and trained by God the gardener (a pruned and trained vine is more fruitful than one left to grow wild).

- 'Vine and trellis' a potentially helpful picture of the balance between our organic, unique growth as Christians and our 'training in righteousness' (2 Tim 3). We need both. Spiritual practices and disciplines are one important element in how we remain attached to the vine and allow ourselves to be pruned and trained.

A couple of notes on language…

- **Do 'spiritual disciplines' sound scary? Not everyone will find this phrase helpful.** A 'spiritual discipline' is basically a habit we choose to do to keep us close to God/focused on God. But if the phrase doesn't work for you/your church, you could talk about 'holy habits', 'faith habits', 'rhythms of life' etc., instead.

- **Why 'Disciplines' and 'Practices'?** Sometimes used to mean the same thing, sometimes different things. 'Disciplines' are more like tools to help you do something; 'practices' are more like ways of life which express something of God's heart for the world. But what language you use matters less than doing it!

Some Classic Spiritual Discipline and Practices

- There's no single list of 'the Christian spiritual disciplines', but over the page is one well-known list reflecting the practice of the Church over the centuries, taken from Richard Foster's classic book *Celebration of Discipline* (1978).

- Note how it's organized into things we do alone with God ('inward'), things which shape our wider life ('outward') and things we do together with other Christians ('corporate'). It's arguably healthy and balanced to develop holy habits in each of these areas…

Some Classic Christian Spiritual Disciplines - with some example Bible verses (list based on Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 1978)		
'Inward' Disciplines	**'Outward' Disciplines**	**'Corporate' Disciplines**
Meditation *(on God, Scripture, etc.)* *Psalm 119.97-102*	**Simplicity** *(detachment from desire for material things, status and power)* *Philippians 4.12*	**Confession** *(which helps us repent and heal the wounds between us and God, and each other)* *1 John 1.5-10*
Prayer *(personal, private prayer)* *Mark 1.35 or Luke 11*	**Solitude** *(cultivating habits of stillness on one's own to spend time with God and cut through the world's 'noise')* *Mark 6.31, Luke 6.12*	**Worship** *(focusing our devotion on the one true God)* *Matthew 4.10*
Fasting *(going without food or other material things for limited times in order to focus on God)* *Matt 6.16 - 'when you fast…'*	**Submission** *(to Christ first and foremost, but also 'submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ'). NB: not an excuse for dominating or manipulating others!* *Mark 8.34, Ephesians 5.21*	**Guidance** *Collectively seeking to discern God's will in particular situations (Acts 15)*
Study *(of the Bible and the wisdom in Christian tradition, and study of the world in the light of the Gospel)* *Philippians 4.8*	**Service** *(seeking the good of others in practical ways, in God's name)* *Matt 20.25-28*	**Celebration** *(Cultivating regular times of joy and thankfulness)* *Philippians 4.4 - 'rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice'.*

Spiritual Disciplines/Practices are for groups and churches as well as individuals

From Dorothy Bass, *Practicing our Faith*:

- Honouring our/others' bodies
- Practicing hospitality
- Good household management
- Saying yes (to God) and no (to sin)
- Practicing discernment
- Sharing testimony
- Shaping (responsible) community
- Showing forgiveness
- Healing (spiritual, physical, emotional)
- Learning to die well
- Singing together

From David Fitch, *Faithful Presence*:

- The discipline of the Lord's table
- The discipline of reconciliation
- The discipline of proclaiming the Gospel
- The discipline of 'being with the least of these'
- The discipline of being with (and learning from) children
- The discipline of the five-fold gifting (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers)
- The discipline of Kingdom prayer

Many things can be spiritual disciplines/practices if we direct them to God and aren't opposed to the Gospel

A selection from Emma Timms, *Faith Habits and How to Form Them*:

- Journalling
- Setting aside time for an activity which refreshes you - e.g., a hobby or time outdoors
- Working with a spiritual director
- Going on retreat
- Committing to set aside quality time on a regular basis with a loved one
- Pilgrimage
- Doing a seasonal or annual life review

A very small selection from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*:

- Slowing down
- Unplugging from technology
- Sobriety
- Scripture memorisation
- Control of the Tongue
- Stewardship of time, money or talents

Many Christian spiritual disciplines are timeless – i.e., they have no 'use by' date. **Others may be 'timely'** – either because they are particularly relevant to our **personal circumstances** currently, or because they help us address a particular need, challenge or weakness **in society/the world** at the moment. Here are two examples:

Practices for resisting fast-paced tech-driven society (from Justin Whitmel Early, *The Common Rule*):

Daily Practices:
- Kneeling in prayer 3 times a day
- Eating at last 1 meal with others
- Spending 1 hour with your phone off
- Scripture before phone every day

Weekly Practices:
- 1 hour's conversation with a friend
- Reduce media content to 4 hrs pw
- One 24-hr fast
- Keeping a 24 hour sabbath.

Antidotes to Modern Living (from Rich Villodas, *The Deeply-Formed Life*):

- **Contemplative rhythms** (to resist 'work, eat, sleep, repeat' culture)
- **Racial Reconciliation** (to resist racism and polarisation)
- **Self-Examination** (to resist superficial, image-obsessed culture)
- **Treating our and other people's bodies well** (as antidote to unhealthy social attitudes to sex, touch and the body).
- **Paying attention to/being with others** (as antidote to culture of hurry and distraction).

Creating a Rhythm/Rule of Life

- Many Christians find it helpful to commit to engage in several disciplines/practices regularly – a 'rule of life' or 'rhythm of life'.
- This is not a 'list of rules' (to feel bad about when we don't keep them), but a bit like spiritual scaffolding for daily life, to help us remain conscious of God, seeking God and taking part in God's mission to the world.
- Emma Timms writes: a rule of life is '*…a support system that helps your life grow and flourish. The rule is the trellis, your life is the flower. The rule helps your life to not fall down and guides your direction. It stops it from being destroyed by a storm and literally provides something for you to cling on to. It is not your life. It is not the point of your life. You can definitely live without one. But it will help you cultivate the life Jesus invites us into, especially if you want to live a life that overflows from connection to God.*[1]
- This session's tool/practice (pp.6ff) is an ideas generator to help you identify some possible ingredients of your own rule/rhythm of life.

Enabling Others

7 temptations associated with spiritual disciplines (from Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, pp. 11-13):

1. 'To turn the disciplines into law' - discipline does not mean rigidity; they should in fact make us freer and more responsive to God.
2. 'Failure to understand the social implications of the disciplines' - they are given to help us live well in the whole of life, not just to become more inwardly pious.
3. 'To see the disciplines as virtuous in themselves' - they actually have little value except that they bring us closer to God.
4. 'To centre of the disciplines rather than on Christ'. The disciplines are not the goal; the goal is knowing God and living God's ways.
5. 'To isolate and elevate one discipline to the exclusion or neglect of others'.
6. 'To think that the twelve disciplines [listed in Foster's book - see above] somehow exhaust God's means of grace'.
7. 'The most dangerous... to study the Disciplines without experiencing them'.

In view of this, here are a few more pointers for helping yourself and others go deeper into Christian spiritual disciplines and practices:

- **Keep God central; be clear about the point** (remember: vision, intention and means!)
- **Partnership, not performance** – not about earning God's favour but co-operating with God's Spirit.
- **Seek a healthy balance** – e.g., between up/in/out, active/contemplative, etc.
- **Start Small** – small, manageable steps, and then build up gradually.
- **One thing at a time.** Unless beginning a rule of life, build up one spiritual discipline at a time.
- **Experiment** – what is realistically going to work for you/your circumstances/season of life?
- **Recognise your/your church's or group's limits** – e.g., time, energy, emotional health.
- **Introduce some gentle accountability** – who can walk alongside you as you do this?
- **Expect to adapt/change** – according to life season, or if things feel dry/unproductive for a long time.
- **Don't beat yourself up** if you forget, feel too tired, or life happens. (Invitation, not obligation!).
- **If you're becoming legalistic about it…** take your foot off the gas, pause, refocus on the main point.
- **Keep everything focused on God.** If any discipline becomes the main priority, we've lost the point!
- **Look for fruit.** The disciplines are only good insofar as they deepen our walk with God. Our feelings will go up and down, but over the long time, a good rule/rhythm of life should bear good fruit.

[1] Timms, *Faith Habits and How to Form Them*, p. 15.

Discipleship Tool/Practice

This session's tool/practice is designed to help you create or develop your own rhythm of life or rule of life. There are so many useful resources already out there to help you do this (see Resources list below) that we won't repeat them here. Instead, this tool draws upon several of the Discipleship Enablers sessions and tools to offer a framework for developing a rhythm of practice to help you abide in Christ.[2]

How to Use: *Use the question boxes below to help identify a range of possible spiritual disciplines or practices which you might build together into a rhythm/rule of life. You definitely won't be able to include all of these in your rhythm/rule (and shouldn't attempt to do so!). You will also notice some repetition between questions. But it'll help you create a menu of possibilities to choose from.*

Discipleship Enablers Rule/Rhythm of Life Ideas Generator		
1. The Goal of our Discipleship		
What are your hopes and desires for living a life abiding with Christ? (These are the things you hope spiritual disciplines and practices will help you with) **Write a few short sentences summing this up.** *(In Session 4 we explored the character of God as the centre of our discipleship. In Session 6 we explored the importance of vision and intention in discipleship. This helps us remember the ultimate goal and object of our discipleship. It's important to have this clear at the beginning).*		
2. Where are you starting from?		
A. What spiritual rhythms, practices and disciplines are you already engaging with? **Write them here, and mark any that you want to either… i) develop; ii) keep as they are; iii) stop doing.** *(The 'Going Deeper' activity for sessions 1-2 invited us to create a spiritual journey map. One of the questions was about what is in your 'rucksack' for the journey - i.e., what is currently sustaining you in your discipleship?)*		

[2] Q1 also inspired by Calhoun, Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, Appendix 1; Timms, Faith Habits, pp.25-29; Q2 also inspired by Timms, Faith Habits, pp.52-53 and various other sources; Q6 also inspired by Timms, Faith Habits, p.164

B. What aspects of your current pattern of life can't realistically be changed at present, which you will need to factor into any rhythm of life you develop? (e.g., family or work responsibilities, fixed time commitments)

Write a few notes here.

(The 'spiritual journey mapping' activity for sessions 1-2 invited us to consider the nature of the path we're treading through life. In any landscape there will be some features we need to go over, under, round or through to reach our destination. What are those for you currently?)

3. Where is God seeking to get our attention currently?

Is there a particular area of life, challenge or opportunity, which you feel God is speaking to you about?

Note it down here.

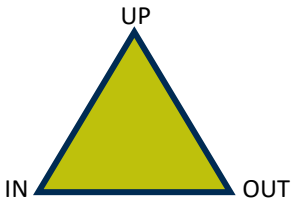
(Session 8 explored paying attention and responding to God. Session 12 will look further at our calling and gifting. As we approach this whole area of spiritual disciplines and practices, is there one area of life God seems to be drawing your attention to, and which might shape your rhythm/rule of life?)

4. What life are we called to lead? And how does this shape our rhythm of life?

a. If a rounded vision of discipleship is partly UP (towards God), IN (with others) and OUT (to the wider world), how might this inform the rhythm or rule of life we create?

Using the UP, IN, OUT triangle, make some notes here.

(In session 5 we used the up/in/out triangle as a way of describing a rich but balanced Christian life. What practices/disciplines could you put in place or develop under each heading?).



b. If you want to take this a stage further, look again at the six 'streams of living water' *(Session 5)***.**

What practices/spiritual disciplines do these six invite you to consider? What might enable you to dive into each 'stream' more deeply?

(In session 5 we looked at the six 'life streams' as a way of thinking about a rich but balanced Christian life).

A prayer-filled life:

A holy life:

A Spirit-filled life:

A Word-centred life:

A compassionate life:

A sacramental/incarnate life:

5. How we Grow

a. If it's true that we grow through…
- heart (relationship),
- head (learning/reflection),
- hands (practice) and
- feet (doing),
…what does that suggest about the disciplines/practices which might keep us open and attentive to God's work in us in these four different ways?

Jot down some thoughts here:

(In session 6 we explored 'heart, head, hands, feet' as a simple way of describing how Christians grow. How do we attend to each of these in our lives?).

Heart (growth through **contact + relationship**):

Head (growth through **learning + reflection**):

Hands (growth through **imitating + modelling**):

Feet (growth through **stepping out + doing**):

b. If you found the '9 Pathways' (session 6) helpful for reflecting on how we grow, consider what spiritual practices/disciplines might help you grow in each area.		Having a clear **vision** of the Gospel: Practicing **repentance**: Developing committed **relationships** of safety, support and challenge: **Paying attention** to the thoughts, experiences and feelings which shape us: Developing a realistic **plan** for our growth: Continually choosing to **lay down our will** for God's sake: **Addressing anxiety, stress or pain** that may be holding us back: Spending time in **church cultures** which encourage growth: **Taking part in activities** that further God's Kingdom:
6. **When and Where?**		
a. Thinking back to Session 3 (Becoming Whole-Life and Through Life Disciples) we explored the rhythm of discipleship through time. **How could you develop a rhythm of life using the time periods listed here? E.g., what practices could you build in daily? Weekly? Seasonally? Annually? At the start or end of a stage of life?**		Daily: Weekly: Monthly:

<table>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td colspan="2">Seasonally:

Annually:

At the beginning/end of a stage of life:</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">b. Thinking back to where we are disciples (Session 3) we used the ‘four fields’ picture to reflect on how we are disciples both individually and together, within the church community and beyond it. What possible spiritual disciplines and practices does this suggest to you?</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td>Individual, inward-facing…
(Whatever your heavenly Father sees you doing in secret…)</td><td>Together, inward-facing…
(Be devoted to one another in love…)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Individual, outward-facing…
(Whatever you do, do it as if you were working for Christ)</td><td>Together, outward-facing…
(He sent them out in pairs…)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">7. Support and Accountability</td></tr>
<tr><td>a. Are you seeking to develop a personal rule/rhythm of life or a shared one (for a small group or congregation)?</td><td></td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>b. Who might support you in developing a rule/rhythm of life?</td><td></td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>c. Who might gently check in with you about how you’re doing with your rule/rhythm?</td><td></td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>d. What safeguards might help ensure that your rule/rhythm of life remains life-giving rather than burdensome? (Since Jesus says: ‘my yoke is easy and my burden is light’).</td><td></td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
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Now have a go at roughing out a rhythm/rule of life using the boxes below. Or if you are more visual person, you could write your rhythm/rule onto the 'trellis and vine' picture on the next page.

If you're doing this for the first time, we'd suggest including no more than six elements (anything more is going to feel overwhelming). Ideally, your rhythm/rule should contain different types of discipline/practices, focusing on different aspects of growing in Christ, across different spheres of life or time periods.

You can (and generally should) make changes to this every so often, ideally with the help of a friend, mentor, spiritual director or church leader.

I am creating this rule/rhythm of life because I want to…

As a result, I choose to…	How often?	In which sphere of life?
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

I will begin this on (date)…

The people who will support me/check in with me about how this is going are…