



Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

15

Youth Ministry
Discipleship -
Simplicity and Retreat

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**Lesson Fifteen: Youth Ministry Discipleship—Simplicity and
Retreat**

Lesson Introduction

Session Overview

- Retreat or Advance?
- Practices of Simplicity
- Meditative and Contemplative Exercises
- Be Still and Know
- Bringing it Together

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session you should:

- Discover methods for Sabbath and renewal in our personal life
- Uncover ways in which renovation and Sabbath can benefit our youth ministry
- Teach the youth worker how to understand and effectively lead youth in simplicity and retreat
- “Put into practice” these concepts by experiencing specific periods of simplicity and silence

Introduction

This session is about creating space and time for reflection, silence, and contemplation. We will not only examine the spiritual practice of renewal, retreat and renovation, we will actually “put into practice” these concepts and ideas by giving you time to actually try some of the exercises. We will also suggest ideas and activities designed to create stillness and listening in the lives of youth. Finally, we will provide resources for planning and implementing a contemplative retreat for youth.

Lesson Body

Retreat or Advance?

Historically youth workers have to address a number of questions when planning retreats.

1. What are you trying to accomplish? (Curricular outcomes)
2. Where will you go? (Location)
3. How will you get there? (Transportation)
4. How much will it cost? (Budget and Finance)
5. Who will be a part? (Target group)
6. What will you do? (To accomplish your curricular outcomes)
7. How will you tell people about it? (Promotion/Publicity)
8. Before and After (Report to the congregation)
9. How will you know if you did what you set out to do? (Evaluation)

However, often our retreats prove to be much more complicated, and busy, than we hoped they might be.

Youth ministry is constantly on the go, even when on retreat. Richard Foster points out in his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Satan, the Adversary, majors on three things in the midst of contemporary society: noise, hurry, and crowds. Our only hope to advance beyond the superficial aspects of our culture, secular and religious, we but learn how to recreate silence.

Practices of Simplicity

From over scheduling to late nights to lack of rest and more hurry and rush, many of our retreats end up looking more like “advances.” Discipleship fails due to distraction or exhaustion. Even when retreats themselves do not appear this busy, the constant pressure of the world often competes for our attention, particularly when we are trying to “simply” focus on God’s presence and direction in our lives. How do we overcome our busy lives and focus on God? This is the challenge of what many in the field of spiritual formation call the practice of Simplicity.

How would you define the word Simplicity? This term is relatively new in discipleship though the concept, like that of simplicity, is quite old. Possible responses might include:

- Habit or rhythm breaking
- Respite
- Re-creation
- Changing routines
- Time-out
- Pause, breather

One way to look at Simplicity is to see the concept as the opposite of forming or developing habits, or the breaking and reformation of existing habits. It is learning to “simplify” our lives from business.

In most churches if one asks rhetorically “What would our lives and/or retreats look like if we intentionally planned and programmed for Sabbath, rest, and renewal?” I suspect they would still look like many retreats that often include a busy schedule, packed with programmed activities, not much different for daily life for many people. We have to consciously decide to live otherwise. If not, we risk living aimlessly with according to daily routines rather than deliberately choosing to live as part of God’s kingdom. Practicing Simplicity helps us reshape our patterns, remove those elements in the background that clutter our attention, and listen more closely to God’s music.

Meditative and Contemplative Exercises

There is a long tradition of meditative and contemplative worship within Christianity. The Bible in general, and the Psalms in particular, remain rich with illustrations and references to this tradition. Great examples surface as we read the scriptures, such as Psalm 4:4, Psalm 27:4, Psalm

63:6, Psalm 77:12, Psalm 119:15, Psalm 119:27, Psalm 119:48, Psalm 119:78, Psalm 119:148, Psalm 143:5, and Psalm 145:5.

Historically many Christian writers have used the terms “meditation” and “contemplation” interchangeably. In one sense both terms speak to the same goal, removing daily distractions so one can focus on God and rest, and receive God’s holy love. As Marjorie Thompson writes, “Such communion with God is an end of itself, not a means to another end, however good. We do not enter the prayer of rest in order to become better servants of God; that is a natural side effect. The sole purpose of contemplation is to adore and enjoy God, which glorifies divine love.”

One way to understand the difference between these two approaches rests in the object of the prayer. Meditation seeks to encounter God through Christian images, scripture, music, even the beauty of God’s creation. The goal remains to use resources God provides to focus our attention away from other distractions and ultimately allow this image to provide a bridge to our encounter with God. The image may be created through words, reading specific scripture or singing a favorite hymn, it may be revealed in a symbol like the cross, or appear like an Easter sunrise to sharpen our attention away from other competing distractions. As we actively focus our attention we become aware of the source of the image, God. Richard Foster calls this action “sanctifying the imagination” so we come to God with both mind and heart set apart for love.

If meditation describes an active or focusing, process, then the practice of contemplation, or contemplative prayer, reflects a more passive or receptive process that relies on relationship. One of the best human analogies occur when we are content to just “be” with someone we love, a husband with wife, or parent with child, resting in a relationship. Marjorie Thompson, in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, notes that contemplation signals our move from communicating with God through word to “communing” with God through God’s loving presence. We find no words for these moments, just a deep sense of God’s love. We release any attempt to intentionally speak or even attentively listen out of our own effort. Instead we quiet ourselves before God, allowing God’s Holy Spirit to work freely and reveal to us a renewed life and a deep sense of wholeness.

In contemplative prayer, we are not escaping our sense of personhood, not stripping away our personal sense of self. Instead we are becoming fully aware of God’s presence, fully embraced in our relationship with God.

Obviously both prayer practices work together, focusing to remove distractions, resting to receive God’s presence and love. Not surprisingly they have been combined in one of the best known practices of “praying scripture” known as *Lectio Divina* or Divine Reading used as both an individual and community practice. Often this approach begins with reading scripture, moving to meditating over the text and even using the scripture to spark a prayer conversation with God, then resting to receive God’s presence. There are a number of excellent resources both in print and online that use the *Lectio Divina* as the centerpiece of both meditative and contemplative prayer.

Meditative and Contemplative practices represent our attempts to practice Simplicity. Practical exercises that create space for these practices include:

1. Talking to God: Set aside time(s) each day for prayer. (minimum 10 minutes)
2. Listening to God: Spend time each day in silence (minimum 10 minutes)
3. Read daily from the Bible as well as devotional classics
4. Observe a weekly Sabbath
5. Keep a prayer journal
6. Rewrite a psalm in your own words
7. Take a walk
8. Turn off your car audio while driving to work
9. Exercise without music, TV or other distractions
10. Fast technology for 24 hours
11. Take an overnight personal retreat to a place with no TV or telephone
12. Practice *Lectio Divina* in your devotional time

Be Still and Know

For the next few minutes I want you to engage in practices of Meditation and Contemplation. Be alone with God, engaged with God.

Practicing Meditation

If you need to find a quiet corner in a room, go. If you need to look out the window, do so. If you need to walk or read out loud, do it. Do whatever you need to do to be fully with God, having totally shut out the rest of the world. Select a favorite scripture or perhaps one you read recently for devotions. Reflect for a few moments on the passage of scripture. As you reflect, make a list of words or phrases that come to mind as the scripture is read.

What did you hear? What words or phrases stand out? How is God described? What responses are asked for?

Practicing Contemplation

Put away all books, paper and pens. Sit up straight, feet on the floor, arms resting in your laps. Beginning now and for the next 10 minutes focus on silent listening. You may close your eyes or simply sit still until our time for silence is over.

You might begin with a simple process from the scriptures and allow time for God to speak to you through the silence

Be still, and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am . . .

Be still and know . . .

Be still . . .

Be . . .

“What was it like? What did you think? What thoughts went through your mind? Did you hear anything? Was the silence uncomfortable for you?” Ultimately the goal of Simplicity is not to “add” another experience but to “create space” for God to speak in the midst of busy lives.

Bringing it Together

We began this lesson discussing typical “retreat” activities. The key question remains whether many of these activities distract us from God, deepen our attention upon God, or help us fully receive God’s love and refreshment. When planning a retreat, we often have specific planning questions that include location, resources, and the nature of the people attending. Obviously not all retreats accomplish the same purposes. However, if the goal is simplicity, if it is creating an opportunity to listen to God, then often this purpose will shape other planning questions. How would our retreat planning be different if we kept in mind the need for simplicity? How would our schedule be affected? Would some locations be more conducive to rest and renewal than others?

As noted at the beginning of the session, young people...and ourselves... are tempted to spend most of our time “busy,” even in our times with God. While the “information” for this session is relatively light, our desire will be that you will use this time to really engage in practices of simplicity, not as another task to accomplish but as an invitation to “rest.”

Application

PERSONAL RETREAT: Although your first thoughts maybe that you could never do this, I would like to encourage each of you to take an afternoon away from your work. Get away from the noise, hurry and crowds. Take your Bible and if possible go to a fairly secluded place—your “tent of meeting.” Spend some time reflecting on your relationship with God. Don’t take any work with you. See the mini-retreat as an opportunity to simply spend time with God. Use this time to not only learn about your relationship with God, but also to learn about what it means to practice rest, retreat and renewal.

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

What types or kinds of things do we do each day that would be considered “routine?”

What is it about routine tasks that cause us to “drift aimlessly?”

What does the quote have to say to us about this topic of rest and recreation in our retreat planning and preparation? Our weekly programming? Our personal lives?

What would it look like for you to “reprogram your frequencies, reduce the clutter of your life and redirect your heart?”

Consider the three phrases the authors used—reprogram, reduce clutter, redirect the heart—are they all the same?

How would our retreat planning be different if we kept in mind the need for simplicity?

What things would be different? What things would be the same? How would our schedule be affected? Would some locations be more conducive to rest and renewal than others? Who should be a part of such a retreat?



Nazarene Youth International