

## INTRO & CONNECTION to SERIES

Much of life looks and feels like a circus. An attractive and distracting scene of movement, opportunity, and noise. Within this spinning spectacle of life we find ourselves most often rotating between performers for the masses to grand stand observers partaking in all there is to offer. Yet, all of us, eventually find that life the circus is draining. Our minds, our souls, our daily living seems to lack abundance and flourishing.

And so our faith tells us this longing for more is actually a longing given to us as image bearers, as ones created by God to participate in his world in relationship with him in a **garden**. After all, a garden, is not simply the 'natural' growth of vegetation; rather,

*a carefully crafted environment made for beauty, enjoyment, and fruitfulness. For flourishing.*

It is garden life with God, in his presence and purposes, that we as humans find our flourishing. The question we have been trying to answer these last several weeks is,

*How do we flourish in the garden while being encircled by the circus?*

The answer is somewhat simple, at least theoretically: [Faith Practices](#). These are the disciplines of our faith family throughout history used to remain steadfast and joyous regardless of our internal conflicts and external circumstances. Faith Practices help us live faithfully and fruitfully in the garden by **cultivating grace**. Equipping us to participate in the fostering of an environment in which we and others can grow up into the fullness of our humanity within God's Story.

It is important at this stage of the conversation to point something out. While Faith Practices are important and necessary to recognizing and living in the garden they are **not the sole work** of the garden. They do not sum up life in the garden.

*Faith Practices are simply the tools used to keep us living out the picture of the garden which is often seen only dimly through a veil of constant motion and distracting images.*

The actual work of the garden is **ordinary life**. Being an employee, a spouse, a roommate, a friend, a neighbor, a child, a part of God's family. That's the beauty of the garden picture. The garden is the reality in which we live, a picture that encompass every aspect of daily living!

Faith Practices simply help us to flourish in our everyday work & life! These disciplines help our faith overcome disorientation, disillusionment and disconnection as we cultivate grace in relation to God and his world.

The Faith Practices which we have looked at already ground us in the ordinary. As reminder,

**Praying Scripture** & **Repentance** orient us to the conditions of God's garden. Reminding us that our story is found in the all-encompassing, gracious, and sure story of God's character and purposes. Awakening us to a much larger world!

**Listening** in the Spirit is the *fundamental act for all work* in the garden. We recognize that the world is neither limited to us nor controlled by us, so in order to walk wisely we must be ones who hear and see God; most evidently in Jesus! Every action begins in a listening response.

**Stopping**, as we discussed last week, helps us to *recognize & enter into the rhythmic seasons* of the garden. Discovering a pattern for life that is attuned to how God works in the good times and the bad all for our good and his glory. Allowing us to find stability in what often appears to be chaos.

Now Stopping can be difficult because of the constant motion of our lives and culture. Indeed, Stopping might be the most countercultural action we can take. For, **Stopping** is the act of ceasing striving for the purpose of taking note.

Not simply stopping to veg-out, check-out or crash. But being still in order to reflect. When we **Stop**, we gain perspective. Self-perspective, God's perspective and contextual perspective. When we take time to be still,

“Things will rise from the depths. As we stop, we will encounter what has been outside of our range of vision, beneath our consciousness, perhaps [hinted at] only intuitively.”<sup>1</sup>

It is imperative that we learn to Stop if we are to flourish in both work and life. As we looked at last week, we do so through several ways:

**RHYTHMIC RESTING** | Sabbathing, Retreats, & Vacation

**PHYSICAL PONDERING** | Mindful Observations of God's Presence in Nature & w/ People

**DAILY DISCONNECTION** | Powering-Off to Reconnect

**CAREFREE CELEBRATION** | Feasting, Parties, & Friendship

The importance of this discipline, stopping as a way of entering into the seasons and rhythms of the garden, is so imperative and so counter to our daily and recurring practices that we will be spending the next several weeks looking specifically at different ways in which we Stop.

This afternoon, we will be looking at way in which we physically ponder called Mindfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Phillips, *The Cultivated Life*. 79.

## DISPROPORTIONATE PICTURE

In the Circus, we become disoriented. Confused because our perspective of the world, of God and our daily expectations of life are disproportionately exaggerated or shrunken.

The world as we see it apart from God is always a *parallel but distorted* lesser, and thus harmful, version of the ultimate truth. There are aspects of our culture that mirror the images of God's kingdom and people; yet the mirror is not an exact reflection.

If you have ever been to a circus or carnival, you probably have experienced the "House of Mirrors" or "Fun House"! In this world you discovered all the entertaining if not disturbing ways in which your image could be reflected and refracted. Perhaps your image appeared as a 7 footer rather than 5 feet 4 inches. Or maybe your hips were widened and your legs and torso shrunk to where you looked more like a pear than a person.



*Whatever the image, the mirrors succeeded in distorting your image. Giving you a disproportionate view of yourself.*

Like the house of mirrors, the circus picture in which we live our daily lives often creates a disproportionate view of ourselves, our situations, and our expectations. While this may be entertaining in a circus, a disproportionate image in real life would distort the way you went about your daily tasks; whether it be the cloths you wore, how you put on your makeup or styled your hair, or perceived yourself to be able or limited in functioning. And image the consequences of disciplining your children, dealing with a difficult boss, or suffering a significant lose from a distorted perspective.

When we live disproportionality, there are always consequences. In every time and culture in history, we are able to see where the disproportional foci are by observing the struggles of that society: psychologically, physically, socially, economically, etc. These struggles reveal where that particular culture at that particular time engaged in work and life from a disproportioned perspective.

*When the picture of life in which we live is disproportionately focused, we put unnecessary energy into aspects of life which are either less vital or even destructive. Likewise, we ignore areas of life which are problems or actually vital to our flourishing.*

For example, we in Dallas, in 2016 are disproportionately focused on...

Prosperity (wealth, clarity, security, the perfect family, career, future, ministry, identity...)

Happiness (desires, meaning, acceptance, etc.);

Such focus **twists** our image of what a flourishing life with God and others actually entails. Causing disillusionment and disorientation in our faith when we do not achieve prosperity and happiness. When our faith actually leads us to give sacrificially and seek the welfare of others over ourselves.

Compelling us to be performers to gain prosperity and spectators searching out happiness. Thus sucking us into the gravitational force of the circus life; **even when we long for something more.**

So, how do we get out of the gravitational pull of the circus life in order that we might have a proportionate view of ourselves, our life circumstances and God? Through the practice of Mindfulness.

# MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness allows us to enter the orbit of the garden. Mindfulness is a centering practice or *practice of centering!*

Mindfulness is:

*paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.*

Mindfulness, from a pop-culture perspective, is what most of us might regard as meditation. The practice of mindfulness is not a uniquely Christian practice. Yet it is a historical Christian practice. Mindfulness has been adopted by ancients and moderns alike to help deal with the pressures of humanity created by the circus life. One journalist, in an article for the *Atlantic*, commented,

“In a practical sense, ‘sitting’ is really all there is to the meditation aspect of mindfulness meditation. For anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour (or more) each day, whether alone or with a group, you sit in a quiet place with your eyes closed, focusing on your breath as it moves in and out. Your mind will inevitably wander, which is where the mindfulness aspect comes in. Instead of growing frustrated with your lack of focus or getting caught up in the web of your thoughts, you train yourself to observe the thought or emotion with acceptance and curiosity, and to calmly bring your focus back to the breath...If you strip it of its religio-historical context, mindfulness meditation is essentially *cognitive fitness with a humanist face.*”<sup>2</sup> (emphasis added)

The irony of practicing mindfulness as simply cognitive fitness with a humanistic or even universal spiritual face is that this centering practice finds no place to ground our emotions or experiences. We find ourselves re-centering the world on our own ideal rather than finding stability and gravitational grounding in something and someone greater, outside of ourselves and our circumstances.

*The true and formative nature of mindfulness is as a practice that does not dismiss our emotions and experiences but allows us to become proportionately aware of them.*

Therefore, in order for the practice of mindfulness to be transformative, we need wisdom, a picture of humanity, in order to mature. Such wisdom comes through the **how we pay attention** in mindfulness. What do we use to center us in order to be attentive?

Attention is indeed the key to Christian mindfulness, for...

“...the word attention means to **bend toward**. In this there is **inclination** and **orientation**. We know another person is attending to us when the other stops, leans and turns toward us, and we see this in artistic representations of the Holy Trinity in which the three Holy Persons lean in toward one another. Theologically understood, **reality is attentional in its deepest structure.**”<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added)

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in part in Susan Phillips, *The Cultivated Life*, 112.

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, 115.

In other words, paying attention is **Worship**. This is why separated from religious history, wise teachers, and God revealing text of Scripture; mindfulness actually distorts. Our worship is focused on something else, something lessor than God. What has historically be called idolatry.

Yet, there is something incredible and transformative about paying attention to what we are feeling and experiencing in the moment in relation to God's presence! For

Attention is **worship** when directed toward something other than us.

And, it is **love** when it focused upon us by something other than us!

The deepest reality of the garden of life is worship and love. Attention directed toward God and a love directed upon us by God. This is the reality—physically, spiritually, psychologically, eternally—in which we eat, breath, sleep, work, and play. After all,

God is love (1 Jn. 4:7-12) and...

...life with God is demonstrated in love (1 Jn. 4:13-21; Jn. 13:31-35)...

...for love is all that will remain when hope and faith are realized materially and fully (1 Cor. 13:13).

But here is why we Mindfulness is so difficult for most of us,

**“Mistakenly** we think of attention as gentle, even passive. In truth, it carries the **force** of desire, the **gravity** of survival and the **heartbeat** of formation.”<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added)

We focus our attention on informational knowledge, rather than affectual knowledge. We spend our time doing rather than cultivating being (like Martha in Luke 10:38-42). We believe, because our culture says it, that information and action are of highest value. Rather than understanding the knowledge without love puffs up and acts of service without a contrite and longing heart are filthy rags.

Our attention, our affections by which we engage our own emotions and experiences, are powerful in our transformation and fruitfulness. Mindfulness allows us to enter into the true power and force of the universe, God's Story, his love. Gravitationally grounded, we are formed there in the rhythmic beat of God's heart as we experience and participate in grace.

*When we practice Mindfulness, we are centering our attention on God as we engage in the present, in our emotions and experiences as they unfold.*

In so doing, we find that we are neither *lost in* ourselves nor *overcome by* our circumstances. Rather, we stabilized and are able to act appropriately to God's purposes. The weights of the moment and forces of the circus are put in proportion. Not dismissed as trivial, but put in their proper place within God's Story and his Love.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

# HOW MINDFULNESS WORKS

Practicing Mindfulness allows to flourish in the everyday work of garden life in three ways.

## #1 | TAKING CAPTIVE THOUGHTS

Maturity, depth, comes through stopping to pay attention, ceasing striving to take note, being still to reflect. Doing so allows us to *discern our heart and the heart of God*. 2 Corinthians 10: 3-5 enlightens us,

“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ”

Speaking truth, praying in the Spirit and word, overcoming all that keeps us from being fully human in following (obeying) Christ. We do not fight with means of fleshly—of human design—but weapons of Ephesians 6:13-18, weapons fashioned by God and given to us to participate in the overcoming of evil for and through peace—the gospel.

“[Practicing Mindfulness] expand people’s abilities to notice and manage their own thoughts, feelings and behavior, a capacity often called ‘self-regulation,’ the fruit of which may include equanimity, open-mindedness and a better capacity for discernment. These practices...fuse the opposing movements of control and release. The first act is to focus on what’s on one’s mind or heart. Paying attention to thoughts and feelings enables a person to release what’s unwanted...Attention to one’s inner experience brings it to consciousness and, then, instead of being captured by the thoughts, **it’s possible to examine them, gain reflective distance and even make some changes**. Theorists write of attentional practice as **a decentering process** whereby the self (or ego) and its concerns are relativized, allowing emotional composure to be achieved...”<sup>5</sup> (emphasis added)

## #2 | PRAYING TO PEACE

When we practice Mindfulness in praying scripture we are in a position to discern what is true of God, what is true of ourselves, and what is true of our world. That is what the Holy Spirit is given us for (Jn. 16:4-17), and after all it is the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God by which we fight for and stand firm in peace. We are able to live with confidence. Neither arrogance or timidity, but with courage as we see the world and ourselves in proper proportion.

“Intimacy with God helps us turn from ideas about God and also those aspects of our own self that interfere with being with God. In prayer...we turn from so that we might turn toward...[practicing Mindfulness]...enables us to cultivate a reflective, discerning distance from the **mind’s preoccupations**. Peace becomes a possibility and eventually so does **nonanxious action**.”<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added)

## #3 | CLINGING WITH CLARITY

Practicing Mindfulness in many ways is turning from the magnets of attention in ourselves and culture by clinging to Jesus. Thus David can pray that God would search his heart and see the deceitful, distorted, disproportionate ways within him and lead him in God’s way which is everlasting (Ps. 51). Yet, in order to repent we need to stop—to cease

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<sup>5</sup> Phillips, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 109.

striving in order to reflect and to cling. We need time, space and perspective to know what entangles us, what we are clinging to disproportionately and thus what to change.

“When we turn from the noise of our lives and attend to interior experience, we recognize our own nature, notice what catches our attention and see that **certain matters have a way of becoming fixed in our attention.** Some of these are pleasant—hopes, plans, dreams, memories, reveries—while others are unpleasant: anxieties, worries, regrets, resentments, obsessions, grief. Some the matters are imposed from outside of us, and some rise up from within.”<sup>7</sup> (emphasis added)

Thus, as one spiritual director notes,

“...A spiritual directee tells me that when she remembers God in the middle of a pressured workday, she notices what is happening at the moment and becomes more aware of her body and feelings. Tensions dissipate. Gratitude wells up as she feels released from the backward tug of regret and the forward thrust of worry.”<sup>8</sup>

Like the psalmist in Psalms 77, the time to ponder emotions and experience in present relation of God re-proportions life. Releasing regret and staying away worry in the attention—worship and love—of God’s person, purpose and family.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 110.



# PRACTICING MINDFULNESS

The key to practicing mindfulness is purposeful attention to the moment, to feelings and experience, in relation to God. That is why text, Scripture, is the best means to practice mindfulness. To enter into your present with a felt—in touch and sight—revelation of God. It is not necessary and you will certainly be able to be mindful through the memory of Scripture. Yet,

**“The aim [of practicing mindfulness] is to attend with acceptance to what is, rather than being either inattentive to it or focused solely on what has been, might be or ought to be.** To cultivate a focus on what’s actually present, many attentional practices begin by attuning to the body. ‘What are you feeling...Notice your breathing’ ...Such attunement can expand our awareness beyond just ourselves...like praying with Scripture...As we stop and are silent before the text, we may notice how our feelings exist in the context of our relationships and the culture.”<sup>9</sup>

This is why we are reading the psalms the way we are, trying to pay attention to the momentary emotions of the psalmists in relation to themselves, to their context and to God. This is how the psalms train us to enter the emotions ourselves. Emotions that allow us to be present and also take us out ourselves.

The disproportionate image encouraged in our culture of self-awareness creates narcissism; but our emotions are meant to help us commune—to deal with ourselves, yes; but also others and God.

Because of our broken emotions, we need to be aware of the propensity for distortion but not to fear it. God obviously doesn’t! He doesn’t need to you be proportionately settled before dealing with him. In fact, it is engaging with him, mindfully being attentive and attuned, that we find proportion—shaping how we respond and how we feel.

So, let’s practice with Psalm 77!

**Begin with Prayer | Praying Psalm 139:23-24**

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my anxious thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way within me., and lead me in your way everlasting!”

**Read the Text | Take note of your breath as you read. This will help you slow down.**

**Reflect on Your Emotions & Experiences | What emotions does this text bring out in you? What experiences come to mind? Be sure to write down the specific part(s) of the text engage your emotions and memories.**

**Discipline Your Thought Pattern | Inevitably your mind will wonder, chasing rabbit trails of memories and emotions or even sliding off to “to do’s” or overwhelming realities of your day. In those times, don’t get frustrated; simply let the text bring you back to center. Re-read the part(s) that started you thinking, taking note again of your breathing to help you slow down.**

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<sup>9</sup> Phillips, 111.

**Pray Back Your Emotions & Experiences** | Begin by asking God why these have come to mind. Asking him what part of his character and purposes do these emotions align with or seem in conflict with. Where is he in the midst of your experiences and emotions? Let your prayers be a response to a God who is there and you will be surprised by what you come to experience!

**Repeat** | As long as you have time, keep the process of entering your emotions and experiences through a centering text keep your thoughts captive.

**End in Prayer** | Praying Psalm 51:10-12

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of my salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”

The more you make this practice a regular part of your daily routine, the more you will be able in the moments of work, raising a family, relationship with roommates, conversations with neighbors; be able to be centered and proportionately respond.

## A MINDFUL ORIENTATION

Communion gives us a physical practice on which we can ponder and be re-centered regularly on the relational intimacy and power of God. On how we are loved by him, and on how he is overcoming all the disproportions in our world. Let's receive such love and give our attention to the grace upon grace of Jesus!