



Summer Slowdown

An invitation to true rest in community

Hey friends,

Do you ever feel like life is moving too fast? That it's going at a pace too quick for your heart? Us too.

Every season has its gift, and summer's is one of slowness, ease, and joy. Summer Slowdown is an invitation to intentionally set a Sabbath pace this summer. To slow your mind and body, embrace stillness, and listen to the voice of Jesus.

This July, would you:

1. Commit to a "screenless summer" — meaning, consider stepping away from social media with us (and, if you feel prompted, any other distracting apps on your phone) for the month of July, or for whatever period makes sense for your community.
2. Gather your community over four Sabbaths this summer and walk through this guide. If you can, we highly recommend printing it out (because that feels so right in a screenless summer) and carving out enough time to steep yourselves in each week's scripture, group reflections, and prayers.

This could be done with your small group or your church community. The important thing is to do it together, because Jesus' invitations and healing are often experienced most fully in the presence of his family. It doesn't hurt to include food as part of your gatherings either.

At the end of this guide we've included resources from Practicing the Way that your community may find helpful as next steps, so that whatever he speaks to you this summer is carried forward in your ongoing apprenticeship to him.

May Jesus fill you with peace and a sense of his nearness as you slow down and sit at his feet together.

Peace,

Practicing the Way

WEEK ONE

Slowing Our Outer Life

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way,
he came to a village where a woman named Martha
opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary,
who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.
But Martha was distracted by all the preparations
that had to be made. She came to him and asked,
“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me
to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered,
“you are worried and upset about many things,
but few things are needed—or indeed only one.
Mary has chosen what is better, and it
will not be taken away from her.

—Luke 10v38-42

REFLECTION

Busyness, like most things, is contagious. We get busy, then we become used to the feeling of being busy, so much so that we find ourselves bustling around even when we no longer need to. Maybe we've forgotten what empty hands feel like, or it's been so long since we've had a calm, clear mind that we keep checking emails even when our 'out of office' is on.

If you ever find yourself doing that, maybe you know how Martha felt in this moment. Here she is, finding greatest importance in her productivity for Jesus in the kingdom, entirely losing focus on her being with the very Love at the center of it.

That togetherness in the love of God isn't just for our spirit; it's also for our bodies. Because without stopping our whole selves, our spirit may find rest in God but our muscular, nervous, and immune systems may never get their own moment of sabbath-soaked healing.

And so, learning to Sabbath begins with stilling the outer life — the chores, the work-think, incessant phone checking, holiday planning, or obsessing over the minute needs of our living environment. That's no small thing. It requires self-control, focus, and a vision of the more beautiful thing sitting right in front of us: the immanent, loving presence of God.

GROUP REFLECTION QUESTIONS

In your community, talk through the following questions, noting any parallels between yourself and Martha in this story.

How do you think Martha may have reacted to Jesus' confronting statement about her busyness?

What are some of the small activities you find yourself obsessing over when you try to slow down and sabbath?

If Jesus said the same thing to your busyness today, how do you think you'd respond?

PRAYER

As a community, take some time to pray, allowing the Spirit to speak to each individually. With one person guiding the time, take two minutes of silence to breathe deeply and become aware of God's presence. Then, in a prayerful space, gently ask the Spirit to show each one of you the ways in which you tend to be a Martha when you're trying to rest and sabbath, leaving two minutes of silence for prayer. Then, ask God how you may begin to move toward being more like Mary this sabbath. Leaving another two minutes or so of silence, close with this prayer;

Father, help us not to busy ourselves
when it's time to rest, to pray, to
admire, and to abide in the beauty
and wonder of your Son. Teach us to
be like Mary when it matters, and to
love you more than the work we do.
Amen.

COMMUNITY PRACTICES

Slowing our lives isn't an ethereal thing; it's tangible and practical. In your community, discuss some creative ways you can practice slowing down each sabbath, and write them down. After reviewing your ideas and considering the suggestions below, choose one or two you can commit to together over the summer break. When you gather next, check in with one another on how you're doing with them.

Here's a few suggestions to consider choosing from:

- Choose a phone free day each week to practice together
- Don't do housework or home maintenance for a whole day
- Choose a no-streaming day to abide by together
- Delete social media and email apps for the duration of your summer break

At the beginning of the summer season, you may also like to create some positive resting practices together for the month ahead, such as:

- Cooking and eating a meal together each Sabbath
- Choosing something outdoorsy to do together one Sabbath — a walk or a beach or park visit

WEEK TWO

Slowing Our Inner Life

So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

—Matthew 6v31-33

Mary has chosen what is better

—Luke 10v42

REFLECTION

It's entirely possible to close our laptops, put away chores, turn off our phones and physically sabbath, and still wear ourselves out on the inside. Anxious ruminations, work-think, negative thought cycles, or overthinking can have the same stress response in our bodies as busy activities can.

We may be resting from outer work while our internal world is physically fatiguing us. Perhaps this is why Jesus continually commands us not to worry, because worry keeps us from slowing down internally, from entering the deeper rest his Spirit longs to bring. Instead, Jesus encourages us to seek God's presence and to let him handle the rest.

That's what Mary was doing. She found her stillpoint in Christ's presence. There she was able to let everything else be and focus singularly on the object of her greatest desire. In order to truly slow down and sabbath, we need practices that anchor us in that same stillpoint. Rhythms that break our negative ruminations and runaway thought patterns, punctuating them with awareness and longing for God.

GROUP REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Have you ever had an experience of stopping work externally, but being busy internally? What was that like?

What can it look like for us to practically stop worrying? What are some practices you have found helpful?

In times when you've been able to find that stillpoint, that focus on God during rest or busyness, how did you do that and what was that like?

PRAYER

In your community, take some time to pray, allowing the Spirit to speak to each individual. With one person guiding the time, take two minutes of silence to breathe deeply and become aware of God's presence.

Then, in a prayerful space, gently ask the Spirit to reveal to each person any internal patterns that keep you from truly slowing down and resting on sabbath. Leave two minutes for him to respond.

Afterward, still in prayer and holding his response, ask Him to show each person one thing we can do to begin to recenter ourselves in him in those moments, leaving two minutes of silence to pray it through.

After another two minutes or so of silence, close with this prayer;

We confess, Father, that our minds
and hearts can be filled with anxious
thoughts and the worries of this world,
and yet you are our deepest desire.
Help us not to worry, and to rest in the
deep places where you long to dwell
within us, that sabbath may become
an 'all of us' thing, making us your home.
Amen.

COMMUNITY PRACTICES

As a community, discuss some creative ways you can practice slowing down each sabbath.

After writing them down, and considering the below suggestions, choose one or two you can practice together over the summer break. When you gather next, check in with one another on how you're doing with them.

- Set a daily prayer time to sit in silence, beholding God for ten minutes or slowly reading through a Psalm multiple times in a prayerful spirit. Or consider pursuing this practice each time you gather.
- Practice deep, slow breathing for 3 minutes in the morning and evening as a way of welcoming God's gentle and slow presence into your mind and heart.
- Take a thought inventory of the most common ruminations and worries you experience during the week and share them with a trusted friend in your community. Pray together, offering them to God in trust.

WEEK THREE

Opening Ourselves to God

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.

You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

—Psalm 139v1-6, 23-24

REFLECTION

Sabbath, like prayer, isn't only practical, it's personal. Meaning, it's not just a day to rest and be mindful generally, it's a day to more fully awaken to the Good News that God lives within us, dwelling there in the loving power of the Holy Spirit, and that he wants to know and be known by us.

That's what lies at the heart of David's prayer in Psalm 139. David isn't asking so much for God's transactional judgement, and he's not even longing just for transformation; he's pursuing a deeper level of friendship with God. He's asking for help to remove every barrier within him for communion.

Because communion, or friendship with God, is predicated on openness and vulnerability.

There is a certain kind of rest that comes from being fully seen and loved regardless. From an experience of being able to let our emotions out toward God and to receive his compassionate listening. From the liberation of hiding nothing, not even our shame, so that we can finally be free of its power. Sabbath is a time for that. It's a time for restoring friendship.

Few things will do that like slowing down. But to feel the gift of that we need to consciously open ourselves up to God.

GROUP REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Do you find it natural to open up to God and ask him to search your heart? Why, or why not?

What are you expecting when you open up to God honestly and vulnerably?

Reflecting on your prayer life at the moment, how open do you feel you're being with God.

PRAYER

In your community take some time to pray, allowing the Spirit to speak to each individual. With one person guiding the time, take two minutes of silence to breathe deeply and become aware of God's presence. Staying in that prayerful place, take a moment to read this passage from Psalm 139, making it your own. Take three minutes of silence afterward to allow the Spirit to speak and to pray from there.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

—Psalm 139v23-24

Holding that response, ask God to heal and empower us to move beyond any anxiety or offensive ways he's highlighted. Allow three minutes of silence as you respond individually. Finally, finish with this prayer;

Father, through your Son you have given us your Holy Spirit, to know us, and to dwell within us, that we may be with you. Help us to open up, and to enjoy the full freedom of living unhidden and unashamed in you, that our sabbath may be more than something shallow, but this deeper invitation to beholding love.

Amen.

COMMUNITY PRACTICES

As a community, think through ways you might invite God to search the deep places of your heart. Write down your ideas, and review the ideas below, and consider committing to one or two of them as a group this week.

- Commit as a group to praying the Examen (or this passage in Psalm 139) together throughout the week and/or when you're together.
- Take 30 minutes each week to journal openly your feelings, worries, and thoughts with God, giving him space to reveal our hearts to us as well.

WEEK FOUR

Abiding in God

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear
fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither
can you, unless you abide in Me.

—John 15v4

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap
a harvest of righteousness.

—James 3v18

REFLECTION

We don't often talk about it this way, but slowing down and finding stillness or peace in God is deeply missional. So much so that the Russian monk, St. Seraphim of Sarov, famously remarked, "Acquire inner peace and thousands around you will be saved."

Stillness and peace are rare. They're realities we must sink, not think our way into. Or in Jesus' words, it's formed in us through abiding in His presence continually.

And so the goal of any sabbath isn't only to experience physical and spiritual rest for one day, but to become people of deep divine rest, full of God's love, internally slow, living as an ensign of God in our worlds.

In our noisy world, people of stillness and peace stand out. They're signs to others that it's possible to come home, to find rest in our inner being, even in challenging times. It makes God's nature accessible, believable, touchable.

But to be those people we have to learn to take sabbath rest with us as we re-enter our lives, something easier said than done, and that takes practice.

GROUP REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What do you think of St. Seraphim's quote about acquiring peace? And how do you think it may relate to James' passage on peacemakers?

How do you think having inner peace may display itself to the world around us?

What are some of the challenges to us carrying sabbath peace into our lives beyond Sabbath?

PRAYER

As a community, take some time to pray, allowing the Spirit to speak to each person individually. With one person guiding the time, take two minutes of silence to breathe deeply and become aware of God's presence.

Then, internally repeating the scripture "Be still and know I'm God", imagine your whole being filled to its very core with God's loving stillness. If your mind wanders, just gently repeat the verse in your mind and return your focus to receiving God's love. Practice this for two minutes.

After the silence, still in prayer, begin to imagine that stillness flowing out from you into every aspect of your life. Bring to mind your relationships, family, work, church, and even encounters at regular shops or events you frequent. Allow the Holy Spirit to give you an imagination for how his peace can yield a harvest of righteousness in the lives of those around you.

After three minutes of silence, finish with this prayer;

Spirit of gentleness, love, and peace,
fill us with yourself and help us to be
peacemakers in our lives. Teach us to
make sabbath our daily reality— not
treating it as a holiday destination—
for ourselves, for our neighbors,
for the world. Amen.

COMMUNITY PRACTICES

As a community , take time to discuss some creative ways you can continue to practice Sabbath both individually and together, even as you look ahead to work and 'life as usual'. See if you can reflect on both external and internal practices that have been helpful throughout this time.

After writing them all down, choose two to four you can practice together in the coming months, with the intention of checking in with each other when you're together.

Beyond the Summer Slowdown

After your Summer Slowdown, your group might consider walking together through a free resource from Practicing the Way as a next step in your apprenticeship to Jesus. Here are four options to consider:

The Sabbath Practice explores what it means to stop, rest, delight, and worship in our era of chronic exhaustion, emotional unhealth, and spiritual stagnation. Sabbath, as an ongoing practice, can create space for God to restore us, renew our joy, and form us into people of a peaceful, loving presence.

practicingtheway.org/sabbath

The Community Practice unpacks Jesus' vision for a new kind of family that offers intimacy, joy, healing, and commitment. Over four sessions, your group will practice simple steps towards becoming the kind of community that stands out in our lonely, individualistic culture.

practicingtheway.org/community

The Spiritual Health Reflection is an online self-assessment designed to help you thoughtfully examine your apprenticeship to Jesus and listen to his invitations to you. It's designed to be taken repeatedly to chart growth in your spiritual journey.

practicingtheway.org/reflection



Practicing the Way is a nonprofit that creates spiritual formation resources for churches and small groups learning how to become apprentices of the Way of Jesus. We believe one of the greatest needs of our time is for people to discover how to become lifelong disciples of Jesus. To that end, we help people learn how to be with Jesus, become like him, and do as he did through the practices and rhythms he and his earliest followers lived by.

All of our resources are available for free, thanks to the generosity of The Circle and other givers. The Circle is a group of monthly givers from around the world who partner with us to see formation integrated into the Church at large.

To learn more, visit practicingtheway.org