

Integrative Paper

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SF503 Initiation in Spiritual Formation

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Throughout this semester, the contents of this course equipped me to be able to live a life more like Jesus. I exercised disciplines I've never done before and poured over information I've never read or come across. It fed my heart, mind, and soul – and it left me hungry.

When I had gone on my first silent retreat and processed over the content of Biehl's book, it emphasized a trait in me that I've been feeling more and more lately – the need to be loved unconditionally. Biehl talks about how “every child needs unconditional love...Assume that children are love sponges,” and even though I am no longer a child, I honestly find that there are moments where I could identify myself as a “love sponge” (Biehl, 2020, p. 33). The combination of mother's ambition to see me succeed in life and attend a reputable college and my inner desire to be a daughter my parents could be proud of eventually led me to carry a crippling fear of failure. I did not want to disappoint those around me and fail to fulfill expectations, so I became a people pleaser and a perfectionist. However, I have already shared my feelings and my fears with my family in the past, and so over the past couple of years, I've thankfully been able to grow and show myself more grace and exert freedom to be who I am.

During my second silent retreat, I took the time to pray and confess my sins as well as the generational sins within my family. My biggest sin pattern in life had resulted because I had been raped and sexually molested by a relative consistently for a season when my mother couldn't watch my sister and me during the weekends. After a rigorous cycle of years of fasting, praying, confessing, and asking for accountability, I claimed victory over sexual sin only recently, which only happened by learning over time how to prevent myself from falling to temptation while slowly finding peace over what had happened in my heart. I really struggled with the idea that “God [had] never done anything wrong [therefore] He doesn't need our forgiveness,” because I felt like God had abandoned me in those moments (Andersen, 2017, pp. 20-21). It took me years to find peace and the courage to address and

forgive my relative. However, I feel like I was able to find a way to logically answer the inner conflict within my heart through the session I had with my spiritual director, which I will talk more about below.

As I was going through the readings assigned during the retreat, the mentoring sessions were a great supplement and opportunity to reflect on what I was processing. I shared my biggest sin pattern in life with my spiritual director and how it had resulted from a relative sexually molesting me consistently over a period of time. As I expressed how I often have trouble understanding how God had protected me in that moment, she pointed out that God couldn't remove free will from my relative. It led me to realize that if God had chosen to stop my relative like I had wanted Him to, then I would be asking Him to remove free will in this world, and by doing this, I would be asking God to not only stop the negative things but everything good that results from free will as well. It would remove the incredible gift of being able to carry a relationship with Him. It would either make Him a God who simply answers when people make demands, or He would no longer be a relational God - instead, we would be His slaves or puppets. Although I still do experience temptation, I am now able to catch myself from falling into a sin pattern that I had to fight for many years of my life.

When it comes to the topic of the false self and the mask I hide behind, my spiritual director and I discussed how I don't struggle with being myself in different settings. She has watched me and walked with me for almost a decade now, so she was also able to confirm this for me. I feel free to be authentic and honest about where I'm at with my relationship with the Lord and what I'm going through in life with others. However, I will choose to refrain when I discern that it may cause issues or stumble individuals to hear me share certain things, which I personally believe is wisdom rather than a mask.

My times of stillness have led me into peace and a shift in my approach towards work and life. My life has been a struggle between balancing all the responsibilities of my corporate job at UNICEF, seminary, ministry, and life. On my birthday last year, I prayed that God would ease my responsibilities at work in the new year so it would allow me to pursue my other passions. Before I knew it, 2023

arrived, and what was happening at work was the complete opposite of what I had asked for. I was thankfully promoted to a new position, but an earthquake had hit Syria and Turkey, and it caused my team to mobilize immediately. I was also being pulled into a secret team and project that could change the course of our organization and the impact we could achieve to ensure all children were healthy, educated, protected, and respected. After sitting in stillness with the Lord, I felt the need to recognize that He was doing something incredible in my workplace, and sharing all of this with my spiritual director confirmed this need. I sadly just felt no joy or sense of importance for it, which led me to fast and create room for the Lord to reposition my heart. Foster had mentioned in his book *Finding the Heart's True Home* how "in the beginning, our will is in struggle with God's will. In time, however, we begin to enter into a grace-filled releasing of our will and a flowing into the will of the Father," and I honestly feel like that was what happened and I was brought into a "soul-satisfying rest" as I practiced solitude, stillness, and fasting (Foster, 2008, pp. 47, 49) It's honestly incredible how these disciplines have led me to be where I'm at within my heart today - I feel freedom.

When it comes to cultivating intimacy with the Lord, I shared with my spiritual director that I have been regularly practicing solitude, prayer, and worship. I have been carrying a hunger to study Scripture more intensely and develop my knowledge around different topics, which I will most definitely do more of once summer hits and the ministry season slows down a bit. I honestly feel a bit unsatisfied with the level of intimacy I'm experiencing with the Lord right now - I want more. I shared with my spiritual director my desires, hopes, and my yearning to be led by the Spirit more often. We prayed together over all of the hopes and desires the Lord had placed in my heart.

Over the years, I have often heard teachers talk about the value of leaders having a spiritual mentor or director that they regularly share with. I believe I was able to experience a bit of that value through these mentoring sessions. These sessions pushed me to sit down and reflect while my spiritual director brought wisdom and different perspective into my situation. I feel like leaders often feel

loneliness, but these mentoring sessions also led me to feel like I was not alone in what I was experiencing. As I live a life striving to demonstrate care and love for others, there was someone who was demonstrating care and love for me. I felt empowered, supported, and more focused on the mission at hand and His calling for me.

After reading *Experiencing God Through Prayer*, I started to incorporate times of stillness very regularly into my daily routine. I started this practice without ever having experienced the fruit of this discipline before, but it's now become something I cannot exclude within my days. I did not know it was something I needed until I started to practice it routinely. In the beginning, I was in the habit of praying and interceding for everything and everyone except for myself. However, through these times, God convicted me and asked me to simply sit, receive, and let peace flow through me. I normally spend a lot of time thinking and praying for others, but He asked me to pause, to pray for myself, and to be present with Him in my times of prayer instead of just talking at Him. I started to begin my mornings with coffee in one hand, just remaining in His divine presence (Guyon, 1984, p. 224). Although Guyon recommended that we proceed in prayer once we "feel a release" after a moment of stillness, I felt the Lord pressing me to continue to remain in His presence - and so that is what I did for long periods of time (Guyon, 1984, p. 224). I quieted my mind and heart, spending time with Him and being present with the Lord. Although I was restless in the beginning, I started to find contentment, peace, and even delight in these times of stillness with Jesus.

The busyness of life - with work, ministry, school, and relationships - had led me to a place where I was completely overwhelmed by everything. There was a point where God had highlighted the need for a paradigm shift within me. As solitude and stillness became a regular practice and after beginning a fast, it started to change the way I started to feel about work. I also started to see a change in my workplace that I haven't experienced since the beginning of my employment at this organization - it strangely became quieter. Through my times of stillness, the Lord has been pouring peace and letting

it flow through me. He has been assuring me and has been a huge source of comfort. The peace I've received in my time with the Lord has truly sustained me.

Through the triads we were assigned during class, I was able to witness how each person uniquely approaches the different spiritual disciplines and spent a lot of time praying for the other members of my group. One person was fascinated with the idea of hearing from the Lord and receiving prophetic prayer, so we spent an extended amount of time praying for one another each time. We all had different areas we needed to surrender and trust the Lord with: healing within family relationships, victory over the fear of being spiritually poisoned, and the heart to steward all work faithfully. Now reflecting upon what we prayed throughout the course together, I realized that we all experienced the Lord answer our prayers. One sister came back from her trip back home, saying her time with family was better than she had ever hoped it to be. Another sister came back from a business trip that she had mentioned for weeks that she was wary of being spiritually poisoned during it but returned physically and spiritually well. I personally was able to find peace and purpose in fulfilling my responsibilities at my corporate job. The Lord was with us as we walked with one another in prayer.

If I were to be completely honest, our discussion times were often dominated by praying for one another rather than discussing the content of our course lessons. However, when we did discuss the content, we often shared about the information we were intrigued by. The other two sisters were convicted to reacquaint themselves with the discipline of fasting. We all were enthusiastic about how we can meditate on Scripture; I was personally fascinated by Foster's differentiation between Eastern meditation and Christian meditation, identifying that while "Eastern meditation is an attempt to empty the mind...Christian meditation is any attempt to fill the mind" (Foster, 2018, p. 20). In addition to our conversations around spiritual disciplines, hearing one another's spiritual instincts and relationship styles gave me a different perspective into people and their different instincts. I thought it was interesting to hear one of the sisters share about how she is a naturalist, because I honestly find nature,

specifically forests, a bit suffocating. Sharing our thoughts with one another weekly brought me insight and perspective into how others approach the different spiritual disciplines and their own pursuit for the Lord.

Through the retreats, readings, experiences, and conversations this semester, I feel like I am better positioned to know how to develop spiritually throughout seminary. My goal is not to practice the spiritual disciplines religiously; it is to overcome sin and to cultivate greater intimacy within my relationship with the Lord through these practices. I will commit to taking personal prayer retreats at least once a year to reflect and thank the Lord for the past year and prepare for the upcoming year. I will protect and continue my times of stillness in the mornings and throughout my day. I want to make room regularly within my week to pray the Word (specifically starting with Psalms) and meditate on Scripture. In the excerpt from *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, Mulholland says “Often we give God the ‘leftover’ time...Give God your best time, the time when you are alert, sensitive, full alive, responsive - when you can be fully there,” and that is essentially what I want to be able to do (Mulholland, 2000, p. 125). I want to give the Lord my best. Additionally, I will commit to protecting my day of Sabbath in order to adhere to “the longest and most specific of the Ten Commandments” and to trust “and know that [He is] God” (Scazzero, 2017, p. 151; New International Version, 2011, Psalms 46:10). Time is invaluable and precious, and I want to be able to surrender and offer what is valuable and precious to the Lord.

In one of our first few lectures of this course, Dr. Wallborn shared with us the definition of spiritual formation, which is “[give] God space in our lives to help us become like Jesus from the inside out to reflect the character of God” (W. Walborn, personal communication, January 31, 2023). Practicing and reflecting on the different spiritual disciplines have instilled a hunger in me to carry His character and release His love to others around me. It has awakened a slumbering giant of a desire in me - one that had been quieted by fear and condemnation - to grow in the spiritual gifts of prophecy,

discernment, and knowledge. I want to be a woman of God led by the Spirit and essentially “yield [myself] to the divine Spirit until [I] am wholly absorbed in Him” (Guyon, 1984, p. 835). The spiritual disciplines have stirred a desire in me to carry greater character and live an even more intentional lifestyle of worship, which I identified as another fruit born out of these practices. It has led me to commit to protecting my time and space with God, thus protecting and nurturing my relationship with the Lord.

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