



CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION

[REVIEW & SUMMARY]

Together we are exploring four dimensions of Jesus brand spirituality: the **active** (doing) dimension, the **contemplative** (being) dimension, the **biblical** (learning) dimension; and the **communal** (relating) dimension.



Last week, we explored the active (doing) dimension of Jesus brand spirituality. Because Jesus is an activist (he's got an active mission, a real world purpose), **to follow him is an active pursuit**. His students are invited to help him do the things he came to do – announce good news for the poor, declare freedom for prisoners, bring justice to the earth. Jesus'

spirituality leads us to be of some earthly good, to join with him in repairing the world.

But Jesus was also a **contemplative**.

To be a contemplative is to contemplate, to look thoughtfully and steadily—to behold. To be contemplative is to be truly **connected** with the world inside and outside of us, and to see how **interrelated** they really are. **The end result, the aim, is not experience. The aim is **love**: love of God and love of neighbor.**

Jesus had an inner life marked by a deep awareness of God that connected him with the world around him. An inner life marked by prayer.

[PRAYING AS JESUS PRAYED]

"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." (Mark 1:35)

We're not told much about the prayer life of Jesus. Jesus taught less about prayer than you might expect. But we do know that the disciples were eager to learn how to pray as he prayed.

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1)

Jesus didn't teach them how to pray until they asked. Prayer cannot be force-fed; it's **appetite** driven. We can infer that when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them, they wanted *whatever it was he had when he prayed*. That something is best described as **intimacy**.

[INTIMACY]

Prayer is a funny thing. It intimidates nearly everyone, and yet nearly everyone does it. Something truly powerful must be driving all this prayer.

Prayer is generated by two things which are really the two sides of the same coin:

- 1.) A **sense of need** for someone/something beyond us to **pay attention** to us.
- 2.) A **craving** for intimacy and a sense of connection.

So let's put this word “prayer” on the shelf for a moment. It's an intimidating word for many of us. Let's focus instead on intimacy. Intimacy is something we could imagine ourselves having an appetite for. **Jesus' prayer mediated intimacy.** His favorite and distinctive manner of addressing God was with the Aramaic term *Abba*, which was an intimate form of “father” close to “papa” or “daddy.”

[THE MYSTICAL CONTINUUM]

We have all had experiences which are somewhere on the mystical continuum. **We don't call them mystical, but they are.** And they involve a wispy glimpse, or a fleeting taste, of intimacy. Of **connection between a deep part of ourselves and something or someone beyond ourselves.**

[Here the leader could consider sharing some of his or her own experiences that touch on this mystical continuum, and perhaps invite class members to share similar kinds of experiences – especially the sort that might not initially be thought of as religious or spiritual in the traditional sense. Following are a few examples or situations that can be helpful for providing a context for the kinds of experiences the class members may have experienced...]

- Carl Safina describing his experience of witnessing three finback whales engaged in a feeding frenzy in the gulf of Maine:

This place is *alive!* In every direction now, creatures far larger than dinosaurs cavort and carry on, blowing voluminous clouds of breath and breaking sea's surface in rings of foam. The scene is ages old. Pleistocene Park. Everything here is giant. The mammals are giant; the fishes, giant; the scale of creatures enlarged to match the oceanic scale itself. The vast sea seems boundless and expansive. From our commanding view the ocean stretches off like a tight azure drum around the rim of the world and here against the center of this drum pounds the rhythm of the living. I feel utterly captivated, connected and rhapsodic; I feel that somehow a sweepingly enlightening, profound realization awaits just beyond consciousness—like a forgotten dream sensed upon waking—if I can take this scene in for a few more moments, just long enough to let myself open fully and encompass it.

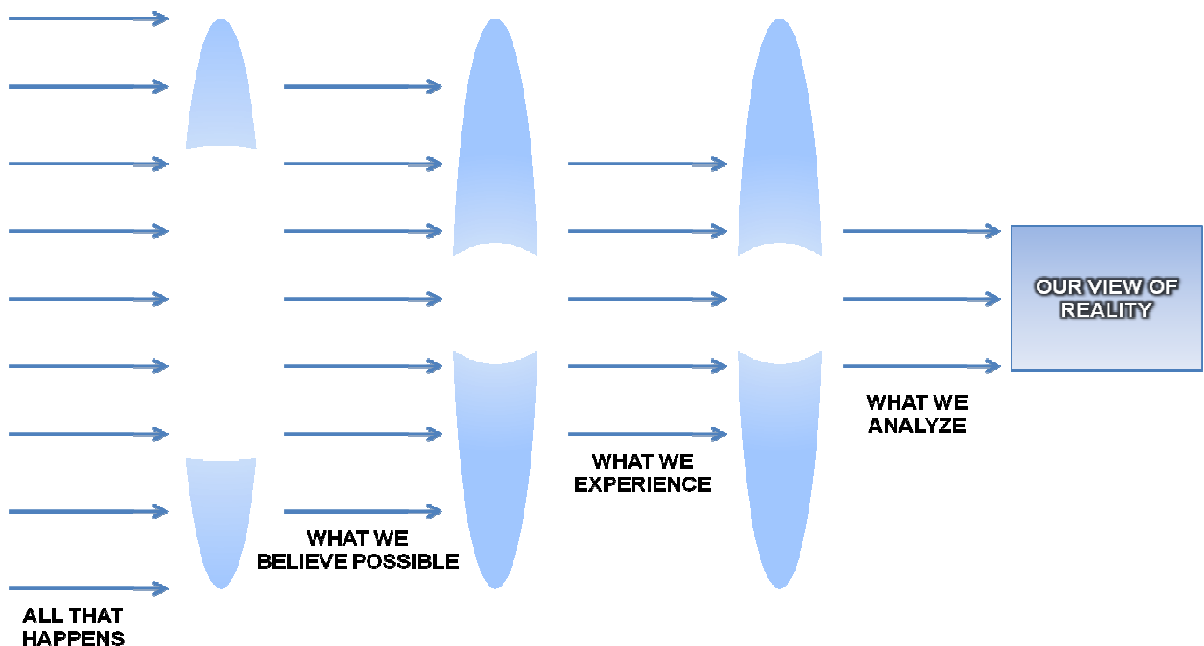
- *Song for the Blue Ocean*, page 22¹

- Sitting in a deer stand, being alert but quiet and still, focusing attention on what's "out there"
- Sitting at a ballpark, or a concert, feeling one with crowd
- Driving through early morning fog with the rising sun shining through the leaves
- Singing or listening to music and feeling like a cat has brushed up against the back of your legs, giving you the mystical shivers

In spite of how common these kinds of fundamentally spiritual experiences are, we can think of them as "weird," **because they don't fit neatly into our modern worldview.**

[WORLDVIEW LENSES]

A worldview can be understood as **the lenses through which we perceive reality, as experienced through our senses.** As we experience the world around us, our brains are constantly making sense of the vast quantities of data, filtering it through these lenses².



¹ Carl Safina, *Song for the Blue Ocean*, pp. 22, published by Henry Holt and Co., 1977

² graphic adapted from Charles Kraft, *Christianity with Power*, Vine Books, 1989

The most powerful of these worldview lenses are **our expectations and assumptions**—how we expect things to behave. These assumptions are sometimes learned from the surrounding culture, or they develop as the result of observing what’s “normal.”

When our experiences are outside of our expectations, as they often are with things spiritual – such as mystical experiences or prayer – **they can seem “weird” to us, or uncomfortable.** We may even ignore them entirely.

Part of the biblical worldview is the idea that heaven is not just “out there” somewhere, **but all around us.** These are the “heavenly realms.” And somehow the heavenly realm is available to us; we enter into it when we pray. **In a sense, we “go somewhere” when we pray.** But not to a place as we normally think of places, but to another *kind* of place entirely.

[BEGINNING TO PRAY]

In order to experience prayer as a kind of “going somewhere,” you can introduce many ancient practices which make sense in the biblical worldview, where God is near.

Breadth Dimension Prayer: prayer through the day in smaller amounts, based on need (like eating).

[The leader may find it effective to use a whiteboard and put a daily timeline up, including normal daily activities (waking, eating, working, eating, etc.) and incorporate small sections of prayer punctuating the timeline at regular intervals...]



Short periods of prayer at intervals throughout the day appears to be the biblical baseline for daily contact with God.

The psalmist describes praying **seven times each day**...

Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws. (Psalm 119:164)

The prophet Daniel prayed **three times each day**...

[Daniel] went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. (Daniel 6:10)

In the book of Acts, we see the early church following the practice of regular prayers throughout the day as well. The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost happens during morning prayers at 9 a.m. (Acts 2:15). When Peter has the famous vision of clean and unclean foods that changes his thinking about the Gentiles, he is in the midst of noon prayers (Acts 10:9). Peter and John are at the temple for mid-afternoon prayers at 3 p.m. when they encounter the cripple who is dramatically healed (Acts 3:1).

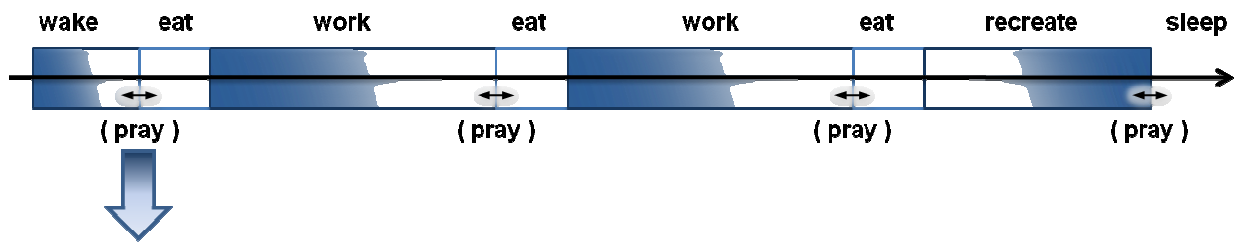
[The leader may want to recommend resources for interval praying, such as various prayer books (for example, The Divine Hours, by Phyllis Tickle) or websites. The leader can find links to helpful resources and more information by doing an internet search for "fixed hour prayer".]

How to get started:

1. Leverage your **current habits** first
2. Start **somewhere**, anywhere, but at all costs, avoid "the all or none" syndrome.
3. Give it **time** (over time).
4. Remember: prayer expresses **neediness**, not holiness.
5. Set up a special place for prayer.
6. Try different forms (give 'em time) until you find what fits you best.

Depth Dimension Prayer: Once the breadth dimension of prayer is taking hold, be open to the promptings of the Spirit to "go deeper" during one of the intervals.

[If the leader has previously used a timeline drawing for illustration of the breadth dimension, he or she can illustrate the depth dimension by drawing a down arrow below one of the prayer intervals...]



Depth Probes:

[Here the leader may want to make reference to the Author's experiences described on pages 122-125 of Jesus Brand Spirituality, or convey his or her own experiences with "depth enhancing" prayer practices...]

- **Silence & Solitude:** "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)
- **The Jesus Prayer:** "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner." This prayer can be said meditatively, linking the words of the prayer to one's breathing. The point of the prayer is to focus attention away from your thoughts and toward God, who has an existence apart from your thoughts.
- **Meditating on Scripture** (lectio divina)
 1. Select a text your heart is drawn to.
 2. Read it slowly three times.
 3. Pay attention to what your heart responds to.
 4. Focus on that portion and place yourself within the text.

Whatever you do, don't focus on getting something out of the experience. **Focus on simply *being there*.** As fully present to God as you can be.

[DISCUSSION GROUND-RULES]

Just a reminder...

1. **What's shared in the group stays in the group.**
2. **No one is expected to share on any given topic; it's fine to pass.**
3. **No unsolicited advice giving.**
4. **Take your fair share of the time.**
5. **Be respectful of the viewpoints of others.**

[QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DISCUSSION]

Note on discussion questions: questions are drawn from both the book and the class, so feel free to develop your own questions if class attendees haven't read the book.

1. The author describes several factors that make it difficult for modern people to understand, talk about, and perceive "spiritual experience" [see pp. 89-96]. How have these or other factors influenced you?
2. The author describes a variety of experiences that are not ordinarily thought of as "mystical" [see pp. 96-98]. Have you ever experienced or felt something like that? If so, what was it like?
3. The author discusses changes in the way people understand the nature of reality [see pp. 107-115]. Do you think people in our society are more open to spiritual experience than previous generations? What factors do you think account for this?
4. What do you think of Phyllis Tickle's analogy of the Internet [see p. 108] as a way to understand how prayer might involve an experience of "going somewhere" as well as doing something?

5. What do you think of the author's recommendation to begin with the "breadth dimension" of prayer, that is learning to pray at short intervals through the day [see pp.116-121]?

6. Have you ever experienced a time of stillness and or/solitude that made you wish for more? What was it like, and how did it affect you?