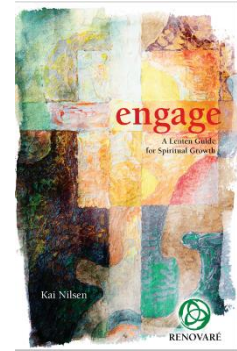


Engage: Study

Session Five

This guide for small group discussion is based on the *Renovaré* resource, *Engage*, written, compiled and edited by Pastor Kai Nilsen with contributions from Keith Matthews, Kathie Nycklemoe and Eric Magnusson and the *Renovaré* team. Download *Engage: A Lenten Guide for Spiritual Growth* from *Renovaré* at: www.renovare.org/books/engage.



Opening Questions

- What is something you enjoy learning about or studying (now or in the past)?
- When you hear the word "study", what comes to mind for you? What does "study" look like for you?
- Who was/is your favorite writer or teacher? What have they taught you about life?
- What are some ideas or comments that you continued to think about after last week's gathering on the faith practice of "community"? What gets in the way of living into this practice? What helps you to engage with this practice?

Introduction

In the discipline of study, we engage the written, spoken, and visual word so that our minds are renewed, our connection with the story of God deepened, and our discernment of what is good and right sharpened. Therefore, we study with expectancy. In the words of Dallas Willard, "Our prayer as we study meditatively is always that God would meet us and speak specifically to us, for ultimately the Word of God is God speaking." (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p.177).

Studying is not just reading or listening or watching. **In our study we engage the material with a sense of expectancy that God is present. We reflect deeply on the words and images so that what enters the mind will shape the heart.** Consequently, what we study matters. We live in a time of information overload. The mass of information at our ready access multiplies in ever shortening increments of time. But, information alone does not change anyone or anything. So, we read, reflect, pray, converse, and then repeat. By God's grace, we will be better able to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves.

- What did you notice in this introduction? Are there any surprises for you?
- When we study, what is the outcome that we are hoping for?
- What does it look like to study with expectancy, meditation, and reflection?

What Does the Bible Say?

What do these Scripture texts tell us about study?

Contemplative Reading

Christians have approached studying the Bible over the centuries in a variety of ways. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), invites us into study and meditation by using our **imagination to enter into biblical stories.**

- Read **Luke 10: 25-37** (or another Biblical story) – *Printed on the last page of this guide.*
Read the story slowly once.
- Reread the story imagining yourself part of the scene. Who is there? What is happening? What are the sights and smells?
- Put yourself in the place of each of the characters. What would you be thinking and feeling? How would you respond?
- If Jesus spoke to you in that scene, what would he say? Focus your mind on one word or phrase that strikes you.
- Say a prayer thanking God for inviting you to be part of the story.

Romans 12: 2 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

- Read the text slowly again. What word or phrase stands out for you today?
- Are there worldly, cultural values that are drawing you away from the mind of Christ, the way of love? What areas of your life need renewal?
- Do you see any connections between this text and the session on worship (session 1)?

Supplement—

Explore Psalm 1 with Pastor Joel Vander Wal in the supplement at the end of this session. This can be used individually or together as a group.

What Do Our Guides Say?

Richard Foster

“What we study determines what kind of habits are to be formed. That is why Paul urged us to center on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious.” (Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 55).

- Think about the things you tend to read, watch, or study? How do you think your life is being shaped by these things?
- What can you study in the future to center your life on “things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious”? What suggestions do you have for one another?

What Do Others Say?

Kai Nilsen

Many personal trainers are touting the principle of muscle confusion as a key for physical growth. By varying your training routines your muscles can't adapt to one specific routine, thus they stretch and break down, and in building back up, they grow.

The same is true for my mind. Throughout my adult life, the times of greatest stagnation have, upon reflection, been the times when I immersed myself in only one genre of books or study. For a season it was only church growth books. Another season I focused on leadership. Still another I focused on culture and how the world was changing. Each had its benefit, but in each season, I reached a point of stagnation.

My wife is always the one who senses it first and, subsequently, has developed a rule for me on vacation – no books about Jesus. So, I press into a novel or a historical biography and my mind is stretched and my heart released. Cross-training for the mind. It's when I am at my best.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- How can you vary your study habits? What do you need to release for a season? What do you need to engage in more fully?
- What changes in how you study can help you focus on God's life and character? How can you continually remind yourself that you are part of the larger narrative of God's story?
- How could the idea of cross-training apply to spiritual practices, especially as you think about the practices in this series (worship, celebration, service, community, and study)?
- What resources can you suggest for the rest of your group to engage in cross-training or a deeper focus on God's life, character, and story?
- As you go forward what spiritual practices would you like to try again or integrate into your life more fully?
- How has your connection with yourself and with others deepened because of your intentional work with one or more of the disciplines this season?
- When or where have you felt a greater sense of God's presence during this season?

Faith Practice – What Can I Do?

- Take another step to “study” and “engage” in spiritual formation. Plan to attend Pastor Joel Vander Wal’s learning opportunity on Tuesday evenings after Easter. He will be using the Renovaré resource, *From the Inside Out*.
- Kairos, Sunday morning adult learning, is another great learning opportunity. Check out the upcoming speakers at: <https://www.incarnationmn.org/ministries/adult-formation/kairos-opportunities/>.
- Read a favorite story from the Gospels. Use the questions from “What Does the Bible Say” to imagine yourself in the story. Possible stories: Luke 15:11-32, John 8:11 or any of the stories in Holy Week and Easter.
- Read more about spiritual practices. Here are some suggestions: *The Sacred Way* by Tony Jones; *Sacred Rhythms* by Ruth Haley Barton; *Soul Feast* by Marjorie Thompson.
- Walk through the sessions from *Engage in Lent*. If you used the reflection questions, revisit your responses. What insights or practices do you want to carry forward from being part of this series?
- During the season after Easter (from Easter Sunday to Pentecost), continue to pray for the members of this group.

Closing Prayer

One: Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked

All: or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers,

One: but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

All: They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.

One: In all that they do, they prosper.

Thank you, God, for each person in this group and the chance to gather with one another. Continue to walk with us and guide us. Remind us that we are a part of the larger story of your love and grace in the world. Bless us as we go out from this place. Amen.

Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline*. HarperOne, 2018. www.harpercollins.com

Nilsen, Kai, and Keith Matthews, Kathie Nycklemoe, Eric Magnusson & the Renovare Team. *Engage: A Lenten Guide for Spiritual Growth*. Renovaré. 2014. www.renovare.org.

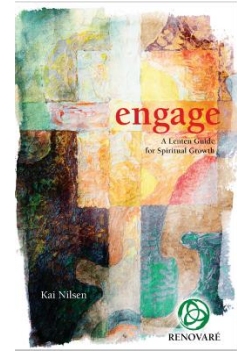
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Scripture texts marked TNIV are from the HOLY BIBLE, TODAY’S NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. TNIV®. Copyright © 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society.

Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. HarperOne, 1999. www.harpercollins.com and www.dwillard.org.

Engage—Reflection Time

Spend a few minutes quietly reflecting, journaling, or writing a few notes on one or more of these reflection questions.



Faith Practice Questions: Study

- What do you think about this practice?
- For you, what is the core intention or hope of this practice?
- What is helpful about the practice? What is challenging or difficult? What do you wonder about?
- What are various ways to do this practice, keeping in mind the purpose?

Insights for the Journey:

- How have you experienced God's presence this week?
- How has your connection with yourself and with others deepened because of your intentional work with this discipline?
- What about this discipline will you continue to build into your life?
- Ask God for continued guidance and encouragement as you make the journey of this season.

Engage—Supplement

Study as a Spiritual Practice

Pastor Joel Vander Wal - created as part of the Wednesday Bible Study



Forming faith in others is more like gardening than woodworking. In woodworking you have control over nearly every aspect of the process in creating the finished product. The materials you choose, the tools you use, even the climate in which you create, can all be controlled. However, in gardening you have very little control of the outside forces in this world. You have no control of an early freeze, or extreme heat. You can't control what animals might decide to take "free samples" of what you're growing. Or whether insects will decimate the leaf structure as your plants strive for survival. The ultimate goal of a good gardener is to create an environment in which their plants thrive. Primarily, this is done through the things you can control, providing nourishing soil and regular watering.

As we conclude our time with this final spiritual practice, our hope is that you have experienced these practices as ones that nourish your faith. As you read this Psalm, notice how the Psalmist describes the one who studies God's law, meditating on it day and night.

Psalm 1 (NRSV)

Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
 or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD
 and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

Questions to Ponder:

- What are you studying right now or what have studied recently?
- What does this Psalm tell us about "study"?
- What are the key elements of your "faith environment" that you need to produce fruit?
- What role does the practice of study play in your faith journey?
- Have you ever felt a sense of delight in studying? If so, tell us about the experience.

Contemplative Reading



This reading corresponds with the *Contemplative Reading* section earlier in the session, under **What Does the Bible Say?**

Luke 10: 25-37

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

- Read **Luke 10: 25-37** (or another Biblical story) –Read the story slowly once.
- Reread the story imagining yourself part of the scene. Who is there? What is happening? What are the sights and smells?
- Put yourself in the place of each of the characters. What would you be thinking and feeling? How would you respond?
- If Jesus spoke to you in that scene, what would he say? Focus your mind on one word or phrase that strikes you.
- Say a prayer thanking God for inviting you to be part of the story.