

DEVELOPING CHRIST'S CHARACTER

WINTER QUARTERLY RETREAT 2023



 InterVarsity
SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Developing Christ's Character

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Suggested Schedule

First hour – Introduction, then relax, walk, rest, eat—give spaciousness to the beginning

Second hour — Come Away, Imaginative Prayer, Contemplating Christ's Character

Third hour – Enjoy unstructured time with Christ (walk, eat, nap, play, create – be led by God)

Fourth hour – Poetic Reflection, Visio Divina, Closing

Supplies

Retreat guide, art journal or several pieces of unlined paper, pen or pencil, colored pencils, device for listening to music.

(Cover painting: Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Study, Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples*, ca. 1905, oil on plywood, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norman Robbins, 1983.95.186.)

Developing Christ's Character

"...who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself..." (Phil. 2:6-7a, NRSV)

Introduction

Welcome to "Developing Christ's Character," a guided spiritual formation retreat. This retreat can be taken individually or communally and is designed to be restorative to you both inwardly and outwardly. Our prayer is that it builds upon the fall quarterly retreat of "Becoming Christ's Beloved," further grounding you in your sacred identity while inviting growth into Christ's character. Desired fruit from this retreat includes:

- Letting go of the false self and unholy attachments
- Growing in the fruit of the Spirit
- Seeing others with compassionate humility
- Discerning next steps together with the Holy Spirit
- Receiving emotional attunement as we experience union with Christ

As Jesus' disciples and ministers of his gospel, "sent ones" to bring his love, truth, and resurrection life to a wounded, dying world, we become soberly aware that developing the character of Christ is an invitation to a radically different life than what we observe all around us and what our passions are innately wired to pursue. If we would spend time on a character study of Jesus Christ, what would we find? What attributes of Christ rise up in your mind as you consider his character? Apart from his holiness and righteousness, I believe we would quickly come to the point of his self-sacrificing love.

Without the cross of Christ, there is no good news.

Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred for his resistance to Hitler during the WWII genocide of the Jews, is often quoted for three potent words in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*: "come and die." This clarion call to discipleship invites Christ-followers to a Cruciform life. If we want to learn and develop the character of Jesus, we cannot avoid his cross. In fact, to know Jesus IS to know the cross.

"The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to **abandon the attachments of this world**. It is that **dying of the old man** which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship, we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with His death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at **the beginning of our communion with Christ**.

When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."ⁱ

But it doesn't simply end there. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17, NRSV). We have crossed over from death to life!

Philosophy professor, minister, and InterVarsity alum Dallas Willard offers commentary on this very topic in his foundational book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

"In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave the world his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was a masterful attack on 'easy Christianity' or 'cheap grace,' but it did not set aside—perhaps it even enforced—the view of discipleship as a costly spiritual excess, and only for those especially driven or called to it. It was right to point out that one cannot be a disciple of Christ without forfeiting things normally sought in human life, and that one who pays little in the world's coinage to bear his name has reason to wonder where he or she stands with God. **But the cost of nondiscipleship is far greater**—even when this life alone is considered—than the price paid to walk with Jesus.

Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). **The cross-shaped yoke of Christ is after all an instrument of liberation and power to those who live in it with him and learn the meekness and lowliness of heart that brings rest to the soul.**"ⁱⁱⁱ

This is an invitation to *resurrection life*, dear one, yoked to Jesus, bearing his cross along with his joy. Perhaps Jesus' invitation to us as ministers of his gospel goes something like this:

Christ bids me come and love.

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). So come away with Jesus, "who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls or lose heart" (Heb. 12:2-3). He is calling to you. Do you hear his voice? Do you see his loving gaze toward you? He longs to spend this day with you, beloved. You belong to him, the apple of his eye.

May you retreat today with a growing curiosity to discover afresh the character of Christ, asking God to develop that character within you for your delight and his glory. Take a gracious pace, dear one. Christ's peace be with you.

In Christ's love,

Julie Meissner
Assistant Director of Spiritual Formation

Come Away

“...who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself...” (Phil. 2:6-7a)

As you enter into retreat with God, let your heart, mind, and body settle. Rest in the presence of the One who knows you and loves you. Begin with praise, worshipping the living God for who he is in all of creation and your life.

Opening Worship

Psalm 65:1-4, NRSV

“Praise is due to you,
O God, in Zion,
and to you shall vows be performed,
O you who answer prayer!
To you all flesh shall come.
When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,
you forgive our transgressions.
Happy are those whom you choose and bring near
to live in your courts.
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
your holy temple.”

Song: “Goodness of God,” performed by CeCe Winansⁱⁱⁱ

Prayer: “Enlighten me, Blessed Jesus, with the brightness of Thy inner light, and cast forth all darkness from the habitation of my heart. Restrain my many wandering thoughts, and carry away the temptations which strive to do me hurt. ... Command Thou the winds and the storms, say unto the sea, ‘Be still,’ say unto the stormy wind, ‘Hold thy peace,’ so shall there be a great calm.” —Thomas a Kempis^{iv}

Settling In

Find a quiet place and get into a comfortable position, sitting on a chair, bench, or sofa with your feet flat on the ground. Take a few deep, cleansing breaths to center yourself upon the presence of God—in silence or while listening to [calming music](#). After these cleansing breaths, simply breathe normally, letting your breath slow to a relaxed pace.

Notice the rhythm of your breathing, your lungs filling with air, your seat in the chair, your back against the chair, and your feet on the floor. Attend with love to every muscle in your body, beginning with your toes, consciously relaxing each muscle and releasing stress as you

hold before God every inch of your body from your toes to the top of your head. Allow every muscle to relax. Take your time. Breathe.

Breath Prayer

Inhale: "Spirit of God"

Exhale: "breathe in me."

Come to inner stillness in the silence. Remain in this posture until you feel settled and centered.

Draw a large cloud-like shape in the space below using your dominant hand. Choose a colored pencil if available. Next, reflect upon the state of your soul coming into this retreat. What word or words could describe you? Using your non-dominant hand, write them inside the cloud, with a new color if available.

Hold these words that describe your state of soul before God, inviting his presence and power into each one. Trust where his love will take you in this time together.

Pause in silence before continuing.

Imaginative Prayer

The Practice of Being Known

Contributed by Dan Kane, Associate Director of Spiritual Formation

Adapted from *Anatomy of the Soul* by Curt Thompson.^v

This meditation is based on the story of Jesus' baptism in Luke 3.

1. Find a quiet place where you will not be distracted or interrupted. Allow yourself to be in a comfortable posture, with your eyes closed.
2. Take a deep breath and begin to imagine yourself in a physical environment that is peaceful and calm. You may visualize yourself beside the ocean or a lake, in a forest or a meadow, or surrounded by mountains-anywhere that exuded beauty and tranquility. Allow yourself now in your imagination, to take a few moments to be aware of your surroundings, simply taking in what you sense visually, tactilely, and auditorily.
3. Allow yourself to sense God's presence. There is not a right or wrong way for him to appear or be revealed. You may even perceive his physicality to the point of being in bodily form.
4. Imagine hearing God clearly say to you directly, calling you by name, "You are my daughter or son, and I do so love you. I am so pleased with you and that you are on the earth."
5. Sense, if you can, God looking you directly in the eyes as he says these words. Do not turn your gaze away from his gaze. Do not resist his voice. Allow yourself to be in his presence for several minutes. Do not leave this place in your mind quickly.
 - a. What do you feel?
 - b. What do you feel God feeling as he looks with tenderness and strength into the windows of your soul?
6. Remember that people have different reactions to this exercise. There is in fact no right response, only a true one.
7. Practice this meditation –it may take only a few minutes –each day for six weeks. If you do, remember that you are not simply engaging with some abstract dimension of your mind; you are changing your brain's neural networks. Practically, this exercise may lead you to a deep awareness of being known and cared for by your Father. Initially, this may take place only during the meditation. Eventually, however, you will find that you can quickly access the positive images, feelings, sensations, and words you hear during the moments of discomfort in everyday life, altering your response to an anxiety-provoking event.

Contemplating Christ's Character

Lectio Divina

Read the Scripture passage on the following page and record your responses for further reflection at the end of the retreat.

1. Begin with a minute (or more) of silence.
2. Read through the whole text in Paul's letter to the church and simply listen to the words like a fresh, new message. What stands out in this first reading?
3. Read it through again and notice words, phrases, or sentences that define the character of Christ. Underline or highlight those words. Write them here.
4. Read it again. Notice what stirs you, either positively or negatively. Record it below. Ask the Holy Spirit how you are being invited to respond. Offer a prayer of response in whatever form you desire (journal entry, poem, song, letter to God, letter to you from God, drawing, dance, painting, creating, etc.).
5. Read again, then simply rest in God. No words are needed.

Philippians 2:1-11, The Message

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.^{vi}

Break

Go for a walk, enjoy a meal or snack, take a nap...whatever feels inviting and refreshing. Spend an hour simply savoring the presence of Jesus and keeping company with him. Return when you are relaxed and ready to continue.

Poetic Reflection

“Little Gidding, IV” by T. S. Eliot (1943)

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.^{vii}



Visio Divina

Study, Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples

"Visio Divina is a way of praying with the eyes open – 'holy seeing' – a way to behold created beauty that leads us to prayer, pondering what we see as through the Creator's eyes of love." – Adele Calhoun

"There is no event so commonplace, but that God is not present within it, always hidden, always leaving you room to recognize him or not." – Fredrick Buechner

*NOTE: Turn the painting page to landscape orientation to view. This is a "study" by Henry Ossawa Tanner, not the final work of art. It invites deeper imagination and reflection in this form.

Let this meditation on this painting hold sacred space for you. Allow your inner noise to settle, placing yourself in God's presence. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your prayer.

- Gaze at the painting with openness, asking the Holy Spirit to help you see with God's eyes.
- What do you notice as you contemplate the scene? Consider all the details standing out to your awareness. Ask "I wonder" questions. (e.g., "I wonder what it feels like to have my feet washed by Jesus.") Notice and wonder.
- What in the image draws your attention to a deeper pondering? Stay with what you are noticing. Continue to wonder.
- As you gaze upon this scene, in what ways does it reflect and image the Philippians 2 passage from your earlier contemplation?
- With your sanctified-in-Christ imagination, place yourself in this scene. What is happening within you as you become part of the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet in the upper room? What might God want to say to you about what is stirring within you?
- What responses, memories, and feelings does the image evoke? What connection does it make with your present life? Take your time.
- Respond to God about what you are seeing and experiencing. Let your ongoing contemplation of this scene lead you to gratitude and worship.



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Study, Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples*, ca. 1905, oil on plywood, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norman Robbins, 1983.95.186.

Closing

"In John's Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17) we see the fruit of [Jesus'] prayer, of his attachment to God. Naturally, in the time of our testing, our true character is revealed. John 13:3, 'Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God,' shows us that despite Jesus entering into what will be the most difficult point of his life on earth, he is solidly assured of who he is. He feels indelibly attached to his Father. And because he is sure of his identity, because he knows and has experienced the Father's loving touch, because he knows that he belongs to God, he can face the heartbreak of betrayal, the torment of torture and taunts, and ultimately, his last breath."^{viii}

—Carolyn Carney, National Director of Spiritual Formation

Examen Prayer

Take some time to reflect back on your retreat. Ask yourself the following questions, journaling your responses.

What was the state of my soul coming into the retreat? What is it now?

What impressions am I left with as I reflect back over each portion of this day, recalling what I noticed about God and myself?

What am I leaving behind? (Name a burden, challenge, tendency, etc. which you brought with you onto retreat but are choosing to leave it behind as you close this retreat.)

What am I taking with me? (As you lay that down and leave it behind, what are you choosing to pick up and take with you instead?)

Music Prayer

"Make My Life a Prayer to You" by Keith and Melody Green^{ix}

Make my life a prayer to You
I wanna do what You want me to
No empty words and no white lies
No token prayers, no compromise
I wanna shine the light You gave
Through Your Son You sent to save us
From ourselves and our despair
It comforts me to know
You're really there

Well, I wanna thank Ya now
For being patient with me
Oh, it's so hard to see
When my eyes are on me
I guess I'll have to trust
And just believe what You say
Oh, You're coming again
You're coming to take me away

I wanna die and let You give
Your life to me so I might live
And share the hope Ya gave to me, the love that set me free
I wanna tell the world out there
You're not some fable or fairy tale
That I've made up inside my head
You're God, the Son, You've risen from the dead

Oh, I wanna thank Ya now
For being patient with me (with me)
Oh, it's so hard to see
When my eyes are on me
I guess I'll have to trust
And just believe what You say
Oh, You're coming again (coming again)
You're coming to take me away

I wanna die and let You give
Your life to me so I might live
And share the hope You gave to me
I wanna share the love
That set me free.

Closing Prayer

“Grant, O heavenly Father, that the spiritual refreshment I have [today] enjoyed may not be left behind and forgotten as I return to the cycle of common tasks. Here is a fountain of inward strength. Here is a purifying wind that must blow through all my business and all my pleasures. Here is light to enlighten my road. Therefore, O God, do Thou enable me to so discipline my will that in hours of stress I may honestly seek after those things for which I have prayed in hours of peace.” –John Baillie^x

Benediction

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor. 13:13). Amen.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God!

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1948/2001), 44.

ⁱⁱ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 2262-3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fair Trade/Columbia Records, “Goodness of God.” Written by Ben Fielding, Brian Johnson, Ed Cash, Jason Ingram, and Jenn Johnson. Performed by CeCe Winans. Produced by Kyle Lee and Dwan Hill. March 12, 2021 © 2021 Pure Springs Gospel, Inc.

^{iv} Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. William Benham, 1886. Public domain.

^v Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2010), 143.

^{vi} Eugene Peterson, Philippians 2:1-11, *The Message Bible* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

^{vii} Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), iii.

^{viii} Carolyn Carney, *The Power of Group Prayer: How Intercession Transforms Us and the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 15.

^{ix} Sparrow Records, “Make My Life A Prayer To You.” Written by Melody Green, performed by Keith Green, and produced by Keith Green and Bill Maxwell. January 1, 1978. © 1990 Sparrow Records © 1990 Sparrow Records.

^x John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer* (New York: Collier Books, 1979).