

Practicing Life Together

Discussion Guide

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This guide is meant to help folks think together about *Practicing Life Together*. When we read a book with a discussion in mind, and when we're given the chance to voice our questions and wonderings, we go beyond a surface-level engagement with it and into deeper understanding. I wrote this book in a way that I hoped would reward discussion (that's why I included questions throughout each chapter).

If you haven't yet read the whole book, I included suggestions for good book discussions. You'll find those in chapter 9, on pages 154–155. It might be worth reading them out loud at your first gathering—and deciding what guidelines you want to set in place for your discussion.

The questions in this guide are meant to spark ideas. You might find that you have very different questions, or only need one or two questions to get discussion going. My biggest advice is to avoid all variety of lousy questions:

- *Yes / no questions*
- *"What did you like / dislike about the reading?"*
- *Questions that have an obvious answer (e.g. "what is the starting point for Christian community, according to St. Benedict?")*

These questions, I say once again, are lousy. They stifle genuine discussion rather than opening it up.

You won't go wrong with questions that invite participants to articulate something you want to better understand. (These tend to start with "what" and "how.") Examples:

- *What does "asceticism" mean? How would we describe it to someone who has never heard of that before?*
- *What is it that makes listening so important?*
- *Why do you think Gutacker starts the book with a chapter on life at the table, when he could have started with prayer, or study?*
- *What makes Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen the greatest dual-threat QB of all time?*

WEEK 1
INTRODUCTION

Before beginning, pray together the Collect for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, reproduced on page 10. Then, start the discussion by inviting each participant to share one line, or paragraph, that stood out to them from the introduction. You can invite these by asking, “What’s one thing that made you go ‘aha!’ or ‘hmm?’”

For bonus points, do this in a particular way: ask each person to turn to their neighbor and tell them their one thing, and once everyone has done that, go around and have them share with the group what their neighbor said. This models something essential: in these discussions we strive to listen well to each other, and hold up each other’s contributions as valuable.

Questions for discussion:

- How does the trellis metaphor help you understand what a rule of life can be? What does the metaphor open up?
- What might be different about following a rule of life with others, versus following one on your own?
- What’s your experience, if any, with a rule of life? If you’ve ever followed one, what did you find fruitful? What was difficult?
- Gutacker names several gifts of a common rule. Which of these resonates the most with you?
- At the end of the chapter, Gutacker invites us to try an experiment: to take on a common rule as we read together. What might we want to include in that rule?

Concluding question: what do you want for our community, and for yourself, from this experiment? What do you hope for? By the end of this book discussion, what do you pray the Lord might do in and among us?

At the very end, have each member write down a question that they want to keep thinking about as you go. Then close in prayer.

WEEK 2
BREAKING BREAD:
Life at the Table

Before beginning, pray together the Collect for the Wednesday of Easter Week, reproduced on page 24. Then, start the discussion by inviting each participant to share the question they wrote down at the end of the first session. Give some time for the group to reflect on what stuck with them from last time. Then, turn to chapter 1, and invite each participant to share: “What’s one thing that made you go ‘aha!’ or ‘hmm?’”

Questions for discussion:

- Gutacker asks a question that was of great concern to early Christians: “How are our bodies involved in our spiritual life?” How would you answer that question? How has this question been answered (or ignored) in the church traditions you’ve been a part of?
- What is the difference between feasting and gluttony?
- What is the difference between fasting and dieting?
- Which of these two—feasting and fasting—do you find most difficult?
- The apostle Paul closely connects the body of Christ that is the church and the body of Christ that we partake of in Holy Communion. What do you make of this connection? How does it fit with, or expand, your understanding of the Lord’s Supper?

Concluding question: Gutacker writes that one implication of Holy Communion is “that the Christian life, our life in Christ, is never alone.” How might we better live this out? How might we better live *with* and *for* each other? (It might be worth taking 5 minutes in silence for each member to prayerfully reflect on one way the Lord might be inviting them to give more of their self to another.)

At the very end, have each member write down a question that they want to keep thinking about as you go. Then close in prayer.

WEEK 3
LIFE TOGETHER: The Gift and
Challenge of Community

Before beginning, pray together the Prayer for Mission, reproduced on page 38. Then, start the discussion by inviting each participant to share the question they wrote down at the end of last time.

Consider a new way of entering into the discussion: ask for a volunteer to take a stab at summarizing what they took to be the 2 or 3 main ideas in chapter two.

Questions for discussion:

- “Christian community starts when we learn to listen.” What is it that makes listening so important? So foundational?
- Each think of a person you know who is a great listener. (To avoid embarrassment, limit yourself to people who aren’t in the room.) What is it like to talk with them? When and how has their listening been a gift to you?
- Bonhoeffer thought that people need to be listened to more than told something. What do you make of that? Do you agree?
- What does it mean that Christ allowed himself to be the needy guest, and for others to play the role of host? How is the host also needy?
- For Benedict, stability was a necessary precondition for Christian growth. But we live in a radically unstable, mobile world. What, if anything, can we learn from his emphasis on stability?

Concluding question: Gutacker outlines three foundational ideals for community: listening, hospitality, and stability. Which of these three do you find the most difficult? How might the Lord be inviting you to commit to growth in one of these?

At the very end, have each member take a few minutes to reflect and write down something they want to try in the next week in that ideal—one way they will embrace growing in listening, or hospitality, or stability. Then close in prayer.

WEEK 4
PRACTICING WEEKLY DINNER

Before beginning, pray together the Grace at Meals, reproduced on page 54. If you can, eat dinner together, then have your discussion to follow. Over dinner, before you get to chapter 3, talk about what each person tried since last time—how they embraced listening, hospitality, or stability. Ask them the two Always Good Questions: What was fruitful? What was difficult?

Questions for discussion:

- How might something as ordinary as dinner be spiritually transformative?
- Tell your neighbor about an unforgettable meal you've enjoyed—not necessarily the best food you've eaten, but a time of conviviality, feasting, joy. What made it so memorable? Then share with the rest of the group what your neighbor said.
- Gutacker suggests six Rules for the Table. What would you add to this list?
- Every practice also entails a renunciation. What would you need to say “no” to in order to say “yes” to life around the table?
- What would it look like to make fasting part of your common rule?

Concluding question: If we found a way to do weekly dinners together, what would you hope for? What would you expect God to do through the practice of regularly gathering around the table?

At the very end, have each member write down a question that they want to keep thinking about as you go. Then close in prayer.

WEEK 5
SPEAKING WITH GOD:
The Life of Prayer

Before beginning, pray together the Collect for Proper 12, reproduced on page 70. Then start with a personal question: when did you learn to pray? Do the thing you now know how to do: have each member turn to and share with their neighbor, then tell their neighbor's story to the group (hereafter I'll shorthand this as "Neighbor Share").

Questions for discussion:

- Why is prayer often difficult? Why can it seem like a struggle?
- What is your experience with the Lord's Prayer?
- Gutacker writes that prayer "begins by listening to what God has already said." What would change if our prayer started with listening? What would that look like?
- According to Teresa of Avila, having a spiritual experience in prayer is less important than being transformed. What makes prayer transformative? How can prayer shape our desires and our wills?
- How much is our prayer about us changing and how much is it about God doing something?

Concluding question: The church fathers saw the Lord's Prayer as a deep mystery that we can endlessly explore and unpack. What has this chapter opened up for you about the Lord's Prayer?

At the very end, have each member write down a question that they want to keep thinking about as you go. Then close by praying the Lord's Prayer together.

WEEK 6
KEEPING TIME:
Living in Rhythms of Prayer

Before beginning, pray together the Collect for Protection, reproduced on page 84. Then, invite each participant to share one thing that has stuck with them from your discussion of the Lord's Prayer.

Questions for discussion:

- What markers of time, what calendars, most define our lives? What do the seasons and rhythms we inhabit teach us about what matters most?
- According to Alexander Schmemmann, God's time has broken into our time. What does this mean? How should it change our experience of time?
- Neighbor Share: What is your experience with the church calendar? What seasons have been most meaningful to you, and what's a season (they're all outlined on page 90) you'd like to observe more fully?
- How might Sunday become more of a day of gratitude, a day of thanksgiving? How might your community keep the feast?
- What might be the benefit of a brief, daily self-examination practice (such as the Examen)? What appeals to you about such a practice?

Concluding question: "Our days are meant to be framed by conversation with God." What makes this difficult? What gets in the way? How might we clear space at the start and end of our days for prayer?

At the very end, have each member take a few minutes to reflect and write down a daily prayer practice they want to try—the Examen, or one of the daily offices. Then close by praying the Lord's Prayer together.

WEEK 7
PRACTICING COMMON PRAYER

Before beginning, pray together A Prayer of St. John Chrysostom, reproduced on page 98. Then, Neighbor Share this question: what daily prayer practice did you lean into last week, and how did that go?

Questions for discussion:

- What's the value of praying together? What's different when we pray together rather than on our own?
- What are some of the goods of praying extemporaneously? What are some of the goods of saying written prayers?
- Collects always begin with something true about God and His character. Why?
- When we pray the Daily Office, we pray the prayers of the Church—we add our voices to the chorus praying around the world. How does this change what we think we're doing in corporate prayer?
- Silence and solitude are hard to come by. What might be the danger of never, or rarely, being silent? Of rarely being alone?

Concluding question: How might we get started with common prayer? What would we hope for, if we embraced a regular practice of praying the Daily Office together? What desires and needs might that fill?

At the very end, have each member write down a question they're left with after the discussion. Then close by praying Compline (or another of the daily offices) together.

WEEK 8
LOVING THE LORD WITH ALL
OUR MIND: The Life of Study

Before beginning, pray together A Prayer for Knowing and Loving God, reproduced on page 114. Then ask for a volunteer to take a stab at summarizing what they took to be the central ideas in chapter seven.

Questions for discussion:

- When is knowing good? When is it not so good?
- What have your educational experiences taught you about learning and knowledge? In other words, what was your education for?
- What's so bad about curiosity? (In the classical sense: *curiositas*.) What differentiates curiosity and genuine study?
- Gutacker writes, "every Christian is called to some degree of theological study, because every Christian is called to love God with our minds." What do you make of this rather bold claim?
- God asks a lot of questions in the Bible. Jesus asked the disciples dozens of questions. What's the value of a good question? And what makes for a good question?

Concluding question: What do you wonder about God? What are some of the questions you have about who God is, or the world He has made?

At the very end, have each member write down one or two of the questions they named, and invite them to pray their questions over the next week. Then close by saying together the prayer of Anselm on pages 126-127.

WEEK 9
OUR INHERITANCE: Receiving
the Gift of Tradition

*Before beginning, pray together the Collect for All Saints' Day, reproduced on page 128.
Then start with the word association exercise below.*

Questions for discussion:

- Before you read this chapter, what came to mind when you heard the word “tradition”? Word associate together until you have a long list. (Consider having someone be the scribe and capture all the associations.)
- What are some of the ways tradition is essential to being human?
- Gutacker argues that we become more, not less, free when we inherit a tradition. What do you make of that?
- Neighbor Share: how far back can you trace your spiritual genealogy? (How did you come to know the Lord? Who told you? Who told them? Where did the churches you grew up in come from?)
- What is the value of learning the lives of the Christian saints?

Concluding question: What does it tell us about God that He delights in working not *around* but *through* us?

Bonus question: why does Gutacker keep going on and on about Buffalo Bills QB Josh Allen?

| *At the very end, have each member write down a question they have about the Christian tradition, or the history of the Church. Then close in prayer.*

WEEK 10
PRACTICING READING TOGETHER

Before beginning, pray together the Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, reproduced on page 144. Then Neighbor Share this question: “Who is a teacher who deeply formed you? Who changed your life through their teaching?”

Questions for discussion:

- What makes a good thinking partner? What makes something *trustworthy* to think with?
- Gutacker invites us to read scripture with the Church. What are the risks of doing that? What are the risks of *not* doing that?
- What do you find inspiring about Gutacker’s call to dive into the theological tradition? What do you find intimidating?
- What is some of the “junk food” (light reading, entertainment, social media) that might need to be cleared away for us to do the harder work of deep reading and thinking? (Is it time to heed Matt Anderson and quit Netflix?)
- Ten weeks in, how is it going for us with the good discussion guidelines on pages 154-155? Which of these do we want to lean into over the last month together?

Concluding question: What would it be like to pull up to a table with Basil the Great, Teresa of Avila, and C.S. Lewis? What’s the first question you’d ask them?

*At the very end, have each member write down a question they’re left with.
Then close in prayer.*

WEEK 11
PREPARING TO DIE:
Living Our Vocation

Before beginning, pray together the Collect for Endurance, reproduced on page 160. Then invite a few folks to share a question they have about vocation—a question about calling.

Questions for discussion:

- What are some of the pitfalls of equating our *vocation* with our *career*?
- Would you say our calling is primarily corporate (a vocation all Christians share) or primarily individual?
- What does Gutacker mean when he writes that the human vocation, the thing we were created for, is to be priests?
- Given the realities of fallenness and sin, how tainted is our work? How good does it remain, or not?
- If Cyril of Alexandria is right about the unity of Christ (that everything Christ does, he does as one person), what difference does it make? How is it significant for our understanding of what it means to be human?

Concluding question: How might the saints change how we envision and imagine the “good life”? How is martyrdom a good life?

*At the very end, have each member write down a question they're left with.
Then close in prayer.*

WEEK 12
HEARING HIS VOICE:
The Life of Study

Before beginning, pray together the Collect for Good Shepherd Sunday, reproduced on page 176. Then Neighbor Share this question: what's something you're presently trying to discern or decide about?

Questions for discussion:

- What might be good about not knowing what's next? What would you add to Gutacker's list?
- The parable in Luke 12 offers a very negative critique of stockpiling wealth. What do we do with that? When is saving for the future good, and when might it be faithless—even spiritually deadly?
- What changes if we think of discernment as primarily about entering into what God is doing in the present, rather than figuring out something in the future?
- If we believed that God isn't at all in a hurry, what might we prioritize differently?
- Gutacker argues that repentance is not a one-and-done task, but a way of life. What do we make of that? How might we embrace existential repentance?

Concluding question: What might be the importance of spiritual direction—of not going it alone, but placing yourself under authority? Of having someone help you do the work of self-examination, prayer, and repentance?

At the very end, have each member take a few moments to prayerfully reflect on several of the questions on page 185—asking God, “What do you call me to?” Give them time to pray and write down a few reflections. Then close in prayer.

WEEK 13
PRACTICING SABBATH

Before beginning, pray together the Collect for Sabbath Rest, reproduced on page 190. Then Neighbor Share this question: what new thought have you had about vocational discernment since last week's discussion?

Questions for discussion:

- What's your experience with Sabbath? Is this a new concept or familiar? One with positive or negative connotations?
- Marva Dawn gives us four Sabbath practices: ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting. Which of these do you feel the greatest need to grow in?
- Why does God rest?
- What are some ways you have found to attentively rest? What gets in the way of true rest?
- What is a way you might relinquish control of your time?

Concluding question: Why, in the part of a book on vocational discernment, does Gutacker point us to the practice of Sabbath? How is Sabbath related to our vocation?

At the very end, have each member write down a Sabbath practice they want to try next Sunday. Then close in prayer.

WEEK 14
AS WE CLOSE

Before beginning, pray together one of the Daily Offices. There's very little text to discuss in this final week, but it's still worth gathering because there's work to do together: discerning if, and how, this group will take on a common rule of life.

Questions for discussion:

- What would we hope for from living by a common rule? How might we ask the Lord to bless it, and the Holy Spirit to work through our practices together? What would we want God to do?
- What practical considerations and challenges would make a common rule difficult? How long would we commit to it?
- What godly authority can we bring in to advise and help us discern our commitment?
- What do we like about the sample Rule of Life (pages 207-208) for our community? What might we change?
- What's the first book we'd like to read and discuss together? What pace do we want our study to take? (Consider scanning through the suggested reading list that begins on page 209.)

Concluding question: What's the next step in writing and committing to our common rule?

At the very end, congratulate each other on having finished a book with so many Josh Allen references. Shoot the author an email (director@brazosfellows.com) to tell him what your group is doing—he'd love to hear from you! And close your time by standing and singing The Doxology.