

“The moment is God’s irreplaceable gift to you.”

John Ortberg

Spiritual Discipline – Mindfulness/Attentiveness

Desire: To live wholeheartedly in the present moment, alert to God and without judgement.

Definition: Mindfulness/attentiveness is a state of active, open, non-judgmental attention to what is unfolding now in the moment in the presence of God.

Mindfulness is a practice that therapists, coaches and physicians employ to boost the immune system, increase memory and empathy, reduce stress, improve attention skills, enhance relationships and provide a measure of relief and well-being for those who struggle with everything from obsessive-compulsive disorder to chronic pain. Mindfulness lowers blood pressure, improves sleep, treats heart disease, helps drug addicts and so forth. It almost sounds like a miracle cure. So how should Christians respond to this practice when encouraged into it by therapists, coaches and the like?

Mindfulness is a practice that keeps people alert, aware and present to the given moment. A mindful person (1) doesn’t go through the day on autopilot, disconnected from thoughts or feelings, (2) doesn’t seek to control or change reality, and (3) doesn’t go into the head and pass judgments on everything and everyone. Mindfulness provides an alternative to meeting each day with its vast array of judgments:

- This is a bad day. He is bad. I am bad.
- This is a good day. She is good. I am good.
- This is not enough. This won’t work.

Mindfulness is a move toward acceptance of and gratitude for what is given. This sort of attentiveness to acceptance and gratitude is central to following Jesus. However, it is also found in Buddhist teaching. In fact, mindfulness is generally framed as a Buddhist practice with many benefits and many definitions: (1) open attentiveness to the present, (2) meditative acceptance of what is, (3) observing thoughts and feelings without judgment, (4) awakening to experience, and more. Can mindfulness be a Christian spiritual practice?

I wonder if Paul might give the same answer, he gave the Corinthians, who asked if it was lawful to eat meat offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8:7-10; 10:25-33)? Can you be attentive to God in this practice with a clear conscience? If not, let the practice go; it is not for you. If you sense that you want to enter into deeper attentiveness to God and your life, you will find many Christian voices that can direct to more mindfulness of God.

In *Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis de Sales (1567–1622) comes close to describing mindfulness in his appeal to honor God with paying attention. Listen to his description of the practice of attentiveness:

Several times during the day, but especially in the morning and evening, ask yourself for a moment if you have your soul in your hands or if some passion or fit of anxiety has robbed you of it. Consider whether you have command of your heart or whether it has slipped into some disorderly passion of love, hatred, envy, covetousness, fear, uneasiness or joy. If you have gone astray, quietly bring your soul back to the presence of God, subjecting all your affections and desires to the obedience and direction of His Divine Will. Just as men who are afraid of losing a precious pearl hold it firmly in their hands, so we must keep a close watch on the precious pearl of our soul.

Where we direct our attention is exceedingly important to Jesus because where we direct our attention determines what our life is. It's easy to sleepwalk through our days of commuting, working, eating, exercising, texting and so on. Christian mindfulness/attentiveness keeps close watch on our inner compass so we can notice if we are mostly present to anxiety about our wardrobe, our longing for food or our expectations about tomorrow. Jesus tells us to be present to God and others, and not only to our worry. "Do not worry about your life. . . . Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:25, 27). A mindful person collects scattered attention and brings him- or herself back to the presence of God.

Now is the time of your life. Now is the only moment you've got. It may not be what you wanted or expected. You may feel lonely, unappreciated, filled with regrets or caught up in a fantasy about "anytime now." But this moment is where you live. It is where the Holy Spirit is present. The past is irretrievably over. The future is not yet here. The present is never in your control. So, inhabit the one unrepeatable moment you have with gratitude and leave the judging of what is to God.

If you have ever emerged from prayer and immediately gone on a rant, engaged in catastrophic thinking or indulged in an interior soap opera, this is a moment for attentiveness. Take some deep breaths to slow your mind and heart. With a long inhale, breathe in God's presence. On the exhale feel your body—its strength and its aches and pains. What awareness is being given?

- What does God want you to notice?
- What judgments came to mind?
- What default coping mechanism or compulsivity kicked in?

Once you notice something (not everything), take it to God and practice letting go of judgment and worry. "Quietly bring your soul back to the presence of God." Listen for God to say, "You are more precious than the birds I care for. I love you." This is

attentiveness to God and to the Word of God. It is the way we keep our mind full of God rather than everything else that pulls at our heart and mind.

Reflection Questions

1. When has it been easier to live your life on autopilot than to feel your thoughts and feelings? Where are you more present to worry, regret or fantasy futures than to God's love and care for you?
2. Where are you more present to worry, regret or fantasy futures than to God's love and care for you?
3. How do you respond to judgments people make about you? How does judging others make you feel?

Spiritual Exercises

1. Keep a record of your positive and negative judgments throughout the day. What do your judgments reveal? Talk to God about what you see.
2. When you sense you are having a reaction that is larger than a situation warrants, take some deep breaths and ask for awareness to let go of anything but God.
3. How does letting go make you feel? What do you want to say to God about that? Imagine who you would like to be in the middle of conflict, disappointment or frustration. What would you need to let go of to become more the person you want to be? Ask Jesus for grace to let go.

Resources on Mindfulness/Attentiveness

"Benefits of Mindfulness," www.helpguide.org/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm

Faith Postures: Cultivating Christian Mindfulness by Holly Sprink

God Is Closer Than You Think: If God Is Always with Us, Why Is He So Hard to Find? by John Ortberg

Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation by Martin Laird

Reference

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (p. 114-117). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. 2015