

THE DEEPLY FORMED LIFE | Session 1: The Rhythms of Contemplation

SESSION GOALS

Every session has a point—what each participant should walk away from the discussion knowing, feeling, and doing.

Main Idea: God wants to be with us, so we should develop habits to cultivate communion with him.

Head Change: To know that our typical pace of life disturbs our communion with God.

Heart Change: To feel dissatisfied with having a superficial connection with God.

Life Change: To embrace a slower, more contemplative spiritual life by adopting the habits of sabbath and silent prayer.

OPEN

When was the last time you went for a walk for exercise or enjoyment? Is walking, or some other form of exercise, a regular habit for you? Why, or why not?

Walking is a great exercise with many health benefits. Walking with a friend has the added joy of deepening our relationship with them—we can talk and laugh and ask important questions of one another. But if we pick up the pace from a walk to a jog, conversation immediately becomes more difficult. Sure, we're still together. But the conversation is strained due to our pace.

Similarly, the pace of our life affects our communion with God. When we are overworked or busy, we may find ourselves huffing and puffing throughout the day, never taking time to stop and enjoy being with God. In this first session of *The Deeply Formed Life*, pastor and author Rich Villodas will introduce us to the practices of sabbath and silent prayer. At a time when everyone and everything are in a hurry, these practices will help us slow down and enjoy the presence of our loving God.

VIEW

Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in Rich Villodas's teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions.

What two images does Rich use to illustrate his thoughts on spiritual transformation?

What has been the result of our busy and frantic effort?

What two rhythms, or practices, does Rich challenge us to adopt?

Watch Session 1: *The Rhythms of Contemplation* (17 minutes).

REVIEW

Rich informed us that *The Deeply Formed Life* will take us on a journey of spiritual formation. **When you think about the idea of spiritual formation, what are the first things that come to your mind? Why do you think speaking of spiritual formation as a journey is important? What has your journey of spiritual formation looked like?**

Rich used two images to help understand the process of spiritual formation—an iceberg and redwood trees. “The iceberg is an important image for spiritual transformation,” he said, because it

reminds “us that God wants to transform us, especially beneath the surface.” God is not after behavior modification, but deep transformation. **Why is it important for us to experience deep transformation, not just behavior modification? How can we know if we are being transformed “beneath the surface”?**

The second image Rich used to illustrate the concept of spiritual transformation was a redwood tree. Redwoods can grow tall because they are supported by wide root systems. Like redwood trees, we need a wide base of spiritual practices to nurture our spiritual formation. **What words would you use to describe your own spiritual “root system”? Is it shallow or deep? Narrow or wide? What could you do to deepen and widen your root system?**

Over the course of this study, Rich will cover five values that foster spiritual formation. The first value is the rhythm of contemplation. **In your own words, what does it mean to practice contemplation? Is a rhythm of contemplation something you prioritize? Why, or why not?**

One of the “enemies” of contemplation is the frantic, hectic pace of life that the modern world imposes on us. We are often stressed, anxious, and overwhelmed with pressures, and feel we can’t slow down long enough to contemplate much of anything. **How would you describe your current pace of life? What effects has that speed and pressure had on you?**

Do you sense in yourself any reluctance to slow your pace of life? If so, why?

Rich said the result of our frantic pace is often burnout, shallow relationships, and disconnection from God. **Have you experienced any (or all) of the consequences of burnout? What do you think it will take for you to climb out of your burnout, deepen your relationships, and reconnect with God?**

One essential truth Rich introduces in this session is the necessity of slowing down. Almost everything about modern life is preoccupied with speed or hurry. But Rich encourages us to do the opposite, to slow down. **Is there anyone in your life who lives an intentionally slower pace of life? What does their life look like? How would you describe them?**

Jesus had a full schedule, but he was never hurried or frenzied. Activity constantly swirled around him, yet he always made time to pull away to be with God in prayer. And prayer is the first practice that Rich commended to us as we seek to adopt a rhythm of contemplation—specifically silent prayer. **In your own words, how would you describe your prayer life?**

Rich said that silent prayer “is attentiveness to the presence of God without the need for words. . . in this kind of prayer there’s no expectation to receive anything. It’s about communion, not transaction.” **Have you ever practiced silent prayer? If so, what was your experience like? In your mind, is it possible to experience communion with God without the use of words? Why, or why not?**

According to Rich, the contemplative life is about “silence before God, listening before God, being with God.” **In what parts of your day could you slow down and engage with God in silent prayer?**

Rich also introduced us to the habit of sabbath keeping, calling it “an indispensable practice for our rhythms.” **How familiar are you with the concept of sabbath? Have you ever practiced the rhythm of sabbath yourself? If so, what was that like?**

Sabbath, as Rich defined it, is a twenty-four-hour period without anxiety or have-tos, which results in deep rest and renewal. **How does Rich’s description compare to your perception of the sabbath?**

Does Rich’s description sound appealing to you? In what ways could a sabbath as he describes it benefit you?

Rich made a point that the sabbath is not a reward for hard work—it is a gift from God. The sabbath is also a reminder that our work will remain incomplete (and that’s okay). If we wait until our task list is complete to practice sabbath, we’ll never get around to it. **Which of these two truths (the sabbath is a gift and reminds us our work is always incomplete) stands out to you most? Why?**

Rich also wants us to know that the sabbath moves us from production to presence. On the sabbath, our focus shifts from being productive to being present—“present to God, to our neighbor, to ourselves, to creation.” **What would it look like to prioritize presence over productivity? How could you personally focus more on being present with God, your friends, family, and yourself?**

Ultimately, the sabbath reminds us that we’re not God, pointing out our desperate need for God and the rest he offers in Jesus Christ. **Why do you think we’re so prone to act as if we’re God? In what specific ways do you behave like you’re in charge instead of God? How might practicing the sabbath correct our God complex?**

These two rhythms of contemplation—silent prayer and sabbath-keeping—are what Rich called “beautiful signs of the gospel of grace.” They are not “productive” but still, God loves us deeply. When we slow down to avail ourselves of the presence of God, he will do deep work in our soul that work and hurry cannot. **When will you plan to introduce these practices into your routine? Who can you ask to hold you accountable to practicing these rhythms? What do you hope God will accomplish in you through contemplation and the sabbath?**

BIBLE EXPLORATION

No one embodied a rhythm of contemplation better than Jesus of Nazareth. He was always present to the Father, his neighbors, and himself. Read Mark 1:35.

Looking at this passage, it’s important to recognize that Mark’s words are descriptive, not prescriptive. He is not mandating that everyone who follows Jesus must beat the sun out of bed every morning, go to a solitary place, and spend time alone with God. He is describing one of Jesus’s habits. But while it’s not a mandate, it is noteworthy and should prompt us to ask some questions.

During Jesus’s ministry, why might it have been important for him to get up early to pray? What does his willingness to interrupt sleep say about Jesus’s priority for being present with the Father?

Jesus was busy—his ministry was bustling with activity. Even still, he set aside time to maintain a deep connection to God the Father. Since his days were full, he made time in the morning to pray. Sometimes, we need to create opportunities to slow down rather than wait for our calendars to open up. **How busy would you say you are on a scale from 1–10? In what ways do you let your busyness prevent you from connecting with God? Do you have any opportunities to remove the busyness from your schedule?**

When could you create time to cultivate a deep connection to God?

As Rich shared in this session, one of the ways we can prioritize being present to God, others, and ourselves is by establishing a rhythm of sabbath-keeping. And from the very beginning, God himself shows us the importance of the sabbath. Read Genesis 2:1–3 and Exodus 20:8–10.

Genesis 2:2 tells us that God rested after “he had completed his work that he had done,” which is a contrast with how Rich framed our habit of sabbath-keeping. For us, the sabbath reminds us that, unlike God, our work will always be incomplete. **In what ways do you find it difficult to keep the sabbath when your work is undone? What could you do to resist the urge to work when you practice the sabbath?**

In Genesis 2:3, we read that God blessed the seventh day and made it a holy day. And in Exodus 20:8, we see that God wants his people to honor the sabbath by resting and being present to him. As Rich said, in the sabbath, God has given us a gift. **Why do you think we often view the sabbath as a checklist item, or even as drudgery, instead of a gift? What practices could you put in place on the sabbath to remind you that it’s a gift to enjoy?**

What changes could you make to your weekly schedule to prioritize the sabbath as a regular rhythm for your life?

LAST WORD

Life is busy. It’s fast and loud, and often hectic. If we’re not careful, we can succumb to the pressures and frantic pace of life in our modern world and lose touch with God. But as Rich said in this session, God has made us to enjoy communion with him—and he’s given us practices that can help cultivate that communion.

Spend some time this week reflecting on the depth of your connection with God. What can you do to develop deeper communion with him? Begin with these practices—silent prayer and sabbath—and watch God take your relationship to new depths.

DEEPER WALK

Slow: Pay attention to your normal habits and routine. Where in your life do you choose speed or hurry where you could slow down instead? Look for opportunities to slow the pace of your life so you can be more present to yourself, your neighbors, and God.

Stop: Set aside one day this week to rest. Refrain from your normal forms of productivity and prioritize being present. Avail yourself of the presence of God by intentionally keeping the sabbath.

Pray: Begin each day this week with silent prayer. Set aside ten minutes to sit with God in the quiet. If you find yourself getting distracted, say the prayer Rich shared in this session: “Jesus, here I am.”

Read: For a deeper dive into the practices of silent prayer and sabbath keeping, read chapters 1–2 of Rich’s book *The Deeply Formed Life*.