

25 Spiritual Exercises



The Guide To The Spiritual Renewal Pledge Sheet

Bethlehem Lutheran Church – Aloha, OR
Fall - 2019

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How to Use this Book

Before we even begin to think about financial commitments to our capital campaign we are taking time as a congregation to reflect on our spiritual commitment to the Lord. All meaningful financial pledges to our God grow out of a personal faith strengthened by his Word and Sacraments. The spiritual exercises described below are all in some fashion or another based on getting us deeper into God's means of grace. (See the Means of Grace booklet for a detailed presentation on how God's Word and Sacraments are the only true vehicles for strengthening faith.)

This booklet is the companion to the Spiritual Renewal Pledge Sheet. The 25 opportunities for spiritual growth listed on that sheet are explained in more detail below.

Study the list. Check this booklet for details on the exercises that interest you and then choose one or more to which you are willing to commit. Check that one or more off on the pledge sheet and bring it to church on Spiritual Renewal Sunday – October 20. If you are not able to bring it to church that Sunday, bring it in the following week or mail it to the church office.

Worship

1. Increase my attendance at church

This is the heart and soul of any true spiritual growth. It is God's design for us that we hear his Word preached and receive his Sacraments administered at church with our fellow members and given out by the pastor. A daily devotional life is important but our personal devotion is meant to be a supplement to the Divine Service. If you are not attending church each week consider making a commitment to increased attendance. It will be the best thing you can do for your spiritual health.



2. Attend midweek services for Lent and Advent

Christmas and Holy Week are high points of the Christian life and church year. That is why we add extra services to prepare for these holy days. One simple spiritual exercise is to commit to attending these services if you are not doing so already.

3. Increase attendance at the Lord's Supper

We know that Holy Communion is the true body and blood of Jesus being given to us to eat and drink but we do not always act that way. We take it for granted. How could we take for granted the mysterious joining of God's Son to us? We all live in constant hope that God would talk to us or visit us. In Holy Communion He actually joins himself to us for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of our faith. Why would we not want to increase our attendance at the Lord's Supper? This is another simple exercise that will mean wonders for the building up of our faith. Simply make a commitment to increase your attendance at the Lord's Supper.

I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? I Corinthians 10:15-16

4. Read the Scripture readings the night before church

Here is another simple exercise that you can do each Sunday. It takes only a few minutes but it will bring much more meaning to the Divine Service and increase your faith muscle.

Each week the worship services are planned around a central theme. The theme is derived from the three Bible readings that are assigned to each week of the church year. The Bible readings, psalms, and collect are organized into a three year rotation schedule to assure that worshippers hear as much of God's word as possible during the Divine Services. The pastor and music director carefully plan the theme, liturgy, hymns, and special music to support, highlight and bring home God's word each week.

Arrive early for each service and take a few minutes and read the Gospel, then the Collect and then the Old Testament reading and you should get a sense of what

the theme of the day is about or contact the church office for a list of the readings for the church year.

5. Singing the hymns, psalms, and canticles (spiritual songs) and speaking the responses

It takes some effort to stay engaged in the words of the Divine Service. There are many distractions – what so and so is wearing, noisy children, thoughts about the game that afternoon, not to mention that our enemy the Devil lies in wait, like a prowling lion seeking to take our minds off his enemy and our Savior Jesus Christ.

This is a simple but excellent spiritual exercise – to commit to staying focused on the words of the hymns and the responses. Before each service it is good to pray the prayers on the inside of the hymnal cover and ask God to give you strength to pay attention to these words of life.

“The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life”
John 6:63

6. Make a conscious effort to listen actively to the sermon

Like the previous four exercises this is more a matter of discipline and attention but it is something that we can all do better at. The words of sermons, hymns, prayers and the liturgy are easy to take for granted and when we do, Satan is able to steal away from us the blessing of God in the Divine Service.

We are thankful that God is patient with our short attention span, but we pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit we would be able to hear and meditate upon the gifts given in His word and sacraments.

7. Make a conscious effort to meditate on the hymns and the liturgy (see #6 above and apply it to the hymns and liturgy)

Personal and Daily Devotion

8. Pray a table prayer before each meal

Asking God to bless our food before eating and giving thanks after the meal are long-standing traditions in the

Christian faith that grow out of Scripture. There is no direct command from God to pray before meals but this spiritual exercise makes sure that we have a regular and routine time to give thanks to God for our food. All effective exercise programs depend on regular and routine behavior.

For sure, giving thanks to God for his blessings is Scriptural. The phrase “give thanks” is used more than 75 times in the Bible. The first part of Luther’s prayer for blessing the meal simply quotes Psalm 145:15-16. Luther’s prayer to return thanks is also a direct quote from Psalm 136:1 and numerous other scripture passages. Jesus continually gave thanks to God before eating (for example, Matthew 15:36). The fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer (*give us this day our daily bread*) also is encouragement to us to see our meals as gifts from God.

The origins of the common table prayer, which is popular among Lutherans, are obscure. It first appeared in print in the mid 18th century. It is an acceptable table prayer:

Come Lord Jesus be our guest and let these gifts to us be blessed, Amen.

Martin Luther put together a fuller and richer table prayer which is recorded in his Small Catechism.

How the Head of the Family Should Teach His Household to Ask a Blessing and Return Thanks

Asking a Blessing

The children and servants shall go to the table with folded hands and reverently say:

The eyes of all wait upon Thee, O Lord; and Thou givest them their meat in due season; Thou openest Thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.

Then the Lord's Prayer, and the prayer here

following:

Lord God, Heavenly Father, bless us and these Thy gifts, which we take from Thy bountiful goodness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Returning Thanks

Likewise also after the meal they shall reverently and with folded hands say:

O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever. He giveth food to all flesh; He giveth to the beast his food, and to the young ravens which cry. He delighteth not in the strength of the horse; He taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man. The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear Him, in those that hope in His mercy.

Then the Lord's Prayer and the prayer here following:

We thank Thee, Lord God, Father, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, for all Thy benefits, who livest and reignest forever and ever. Amen.

Since this fuller version of the table prayer includes numerous Bible references, praying it would be a great spiritual exercise to bring more of God's word into your daily life.

9/ Read the daily devotion in "A Treasury of Daily Prayer"

This is one of the best devotional resource from Concordia Publishing House. Many are calling it the best Lutheran devotional ever produced. Their catalog describes it like this.

Cultivate an enriching devotional life with a book that nourishes your time with God. This comprehensive Lutheran resource brings together Scripture readings, prayers, psalms, hymns, and devotional readings from the church fathers to guide daily prayer and meditation on God's Word.

Organized around the Christian Church Year, Treasury of Daily Prayer is designed to be an all-in-

one resource for daily devotions for individuals, families, and small groups.

The regular edition has a durable sewn binding and includes a FREE 6-ribbon bookmark to help organize your daily prayer and devotion.

You can view a how-to use it resource for the book on the CPH website. Go to the entry for the Treasury of Daily Prayer and click on cph.org/prayer.

10. Follow the order of daily devotion in the “Lutheran Service Book”

On page 294 of the Lutheran Service Book, there is a guide for daily prayer. There are options for morning, noon, and evening. It is a simple order of personal or family devotion.

11. Pray Luther’s Morning and Evening Prayer each day

Pray Luther’s morning prayer and/or his evening prayer. Make use of the prayer tents that have the morning and evening prayers on them. Place them by your bedside or some other convenient place.

12. Pray each day for those in need from the weekly church list

This is a great way to add substance and form to your daily prayers. Simply get a list of names prayed for in church and place it by your bedside and pray through the list of names.

13. Keep a prayer log or journal

Use your computer calendar or a handwritten calendar or just a notebook and track your prayer needs and the needs of others. Take a moment each day to record your new prayers and update previous items on the list.

14. Fast once a month in preparation for church or to pray for a special need

Like all of these spiritual exercises fasting is not demanded by God but it is suggested by Jesus and the apostles. In Matthew 6 Jesus tells us that when we do fast we should not do it in such a way that everyone sees it or knows about it so that we can win the favor of man. Thus Jesus allows for fasting but warns against making it a self-righteous practice. In Acts 13:2 and 14:23 we see that fasting was one of the spiritual exercises of the apostles.

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Acts 14:23

The Bible does not say much about the purpose of fasting but in the case of Moses at Mt. Sinai, Jesus in the wilderness and Paul after his conversion, the common thread is reflection on God's word and prayer. The purpose of fasting therefore is to add focus to your prayer and devotional life.

Fasting does not need to be total nor continuous to aid one's study and meditation. The fast can include a few basic food and drink items such as bread/crackers and water or whatever else you commit to doing. It can also have varying time lengths. For instance you could commit to fasting each Saturday for a month. You could also commit to not eating during the daylight hours or some other time constraint. You could also abstain from certain types of foods for a given time. Always remember though that you are abstaining in order to focus on prayer and study of God's word. Giving up chocolate or desserts for a time does not impress God. Giving them up and replacing them with prayer and study does reap a harvest of maturing faith.

When considering fasting and other oaths it is always important to remember Martin Luther's warning. Luther knew a lot about the harmful effects of oaths. He and

some many others in the Reformation had to reject their oaths of chastity and poverty from their days as monks. Luther agrees that it is fine to take an oath, such as a commitment to God for a period of fasting but he also states that these oaths are not necessary and that we should be very careful when putting ourselves under an oath to God. It is better to have never taken an oath than to break it before God. So be very careful when taking oaths of fasting.

This is a good time to mention an old time Lutheran manner of fasting and one that is commendable. There was a time when Lutherans would not eat anything on the morning of the Divine Service. That way, the first thing to touch their lips that day would be the body and blood of Christ. (Of course a small cracker and some water to fend off an early morning stomach cramp would not be out of line.) Such a fast would certainly highlight the gift of the Lord's Supper.

Growing in the Knowledge of Christ

15. Join a Sunday or weekday Bible class at church

Every Christian should take advantage of opportunities to learn from their pastor as he teaches the faith. When we learn the faith we not only grow our understanding but also grow our faith. Consider these Bible passages:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
Romans 1:16

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. Romans 10:17

So faith is created and sustained by the word of God.

16. Read a psalm a day to my children

The Book of Psalms is the hymn and poetry book of the Bible. It includes praise, thanksgiving, and please for God's mercy and help. It also is full of word pictures which will be interesting to children.

Children can most certainly benefit from spiritual exercise. If you take time to read a psalm a day to them they will not only benefit from the countless promises of God in this book but they will also grow up being comfortable in this great hymn book of the Bible.

Be sure to read the psalm yourself before reading it to the children. Some psalms contain some topics such as war and vengeance, that need to be carefully explained to children.

17. Pray one psalm a day or one psalm a week

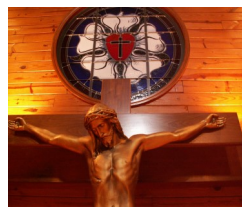
Praying the psalms is an easy way to learn how to pray and to be assured that your prayers are pleasing to God. The method is simple. You read a line from a psalm, reflect and meditate on it (concentrate on it and think about what it means) and then say a line or two of prayer based on it. Here is an example from the most familiar psalm:

Psalm 23:1 - The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.

"Lord, I thank you for looking after me as a shepherd cares for his sheep. I am sorry that I have strayed so many times but thank you for sticking by me. Even though I am never satisfied with what I have, you always keep a roof over my head, clothes on my back and food on my table. Thank you."

Here is another example.

Psalm 46:1-2 - God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea...



"Dear God, thank you for taking care of me. I

shudder with fear thinking about where I will be in the future, but it gives me peace to know that no matter what happens, you are my strength.”

What makes this such a meaningful way to pray is that one is praying back to God the very words He has inspired through the Holy Spirit. Just like our earthly fathers like to hear us say back to them the very words they have spoken to us, so it is with our heavenly Father. You can be assured that your prayers are pleasing to God because they grow right out of His very word.

The Lutheran Study Bible would be helpful for this exercise for those psalm verses that are difficult to understand.

18. Read the Book of Psalms in one year

If you read three psalms a week you will get through the entire book in one year. It would be helpful to have a study Bible that gives you background on each psalm and explains some of the more difficult passages.

19. Read the books of Exodus, John and Romans in a year (less than two chapters a week)

If you are too busy to read the entire Bible in one year then start with a sampling. One could come up with several different samplings of the Bible but not many would get to the heart of God’s message like these three books of the Bible. Exodus will get you into the great salvation of the Old Testament, the crossing of the Red Sea and hopefully wet your appetite for Genesis. It will also foreshadow the story of Christ that you will read in the book of John which is the great New Testament salvation event and the greatest work of God to which the entire Bible points.

20. Read the book of Hebrews four times in the next year to increase sacramental piety

Many theologians believe the book of Hebrews is a booklet intended to prepare people to receive the Lord’s Supper. It is not



an easy book so reading it through four times in a row in one year would be a really good thing. As with our other Bible study reading exercises we recommend that you read it with a study Bible to help you understand some of the more difficult passages. As always, our favorite study Bible and the one we recommend is the new Lutheran Study Bible available from Concordia Publishing House.

21. Purchase an ESV Study Bible and pick one book of the Bible and read the text and the notes

The new Lutheran Study Bible is a real blessing for the church. It is the first study Bible published by conservative and confessional Lutherans for Lutherans. The notes on the bottom of each page will help you understand the Bible. The maps, charts and timelines will also help.

For this spiritual exercise all you need to do is pick one book of the Bible and over the course of the next year read it over a few times, including the notes in the Study Bible and become an expert in that book of the Bible and let your knowledge of it build you up in the faith of Christ.

22. Read through the Augsburg Confession and its Apology in a year

The Augsburg Confession answers the question of what is means to be Lutheran. The Augsburg Confession (1530) was presented by the German princes to the Holy Roman Emperor as the base confession of what Lutherans believe. It is the still the base confession of Lutheranism. The Augsburg Confession was written to show that the Lutheran faith is faithful to Scripture and faithful to what the historic Church has taught.

Because the Augsburg Confession tells us the core of our Lutheran faith, it is good for Lutherans to read through it often. The Augsburg Confession is chiefly concerned with showing the certainty of our salvation in Christ brought to us through the Means of Grace.

Since the Roman Catholic Church disputed many of the articles in the Augsburg Confession, the Lutherans had to respond to their criticism. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession is our response. In the Apology you will see a more detailed exposition of our basic confession that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ. Of special worth is reading the Apology Article IV, which is an excellent exposition of our teaching of justification by faith alone.

Reading through the Augsburg Confession and the Apology every year would be an excellent spiritual exercise for every Lutheran to do.

23. Read through the Small and Large Catechism in a year

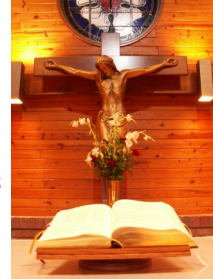
Reading through the Catechisms on a yearly basis is an excellent spiritual exercise. The Small Catechism was designed by Martin Luther to be the daily handbook for the baptismal life. As such, it is important to read and meditate on the Small Catechism on a daily basis. Reading a short section of the Small Catechism along with one's daily bible reading is a great spiritual exercise.

The Large Catechism fleshes out the Small Catechism. In the Large Catechism, Luther takes special care to explain a Christian understanding of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar. With the Sacrament of the Altar Luther takes up Confession and Absolution. Along with reading the Small Catechism, it is a wonderful spiritual exercise to read the Large Catechism every year.

Like the Augsburg Confession above, these are fundamental works of Lutheranism. Luther wrote them for this very purpose – for Christians to exercise their faith. You can purchase copies of the catechisms from CPH or you can read them online at <http://www.bookofconcord.org/>.

24. Read through the whole Bible in a year

If you have never read through the Bible from cover to cover this would be a great spiritual exercise. It can be a little difficult in places so it might be a good idea to use a good study Bible that provides introductions to each book of the Bible and notes on difficult passages.



25. Read through the Book of Concord in a year

The Book of Concord was written in the 16th century and contains all of the fundamental Lutheran statements of faith. It is not the easiest reading but when you complete it you will know the Scriptural and Lutheran faith intimately. Copies of the Book of Concord can be found at <http://www.bookofconcord.org/>, purchased from Concordia Publishing House, or checked out from the church library.

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to Build God's
FAMILY

