

fLunking sainthooed

A Year of Breaking the Sabbath,
Forgetting to Pray,
and Still Loving My Neighbor

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GETTING STARTED: Use this Group Discussion Guide together with your copy of *Flunking Sainthood*. Either individually or as part of a group, discuss these questions; they are organized according to the chapters of the original book.

1 choosing practices

1. How would you describe the earliest stirrings of your faith? What were some of the things you did that caused you to seek God? Did you have an “innate religiosity” (see p. 2) or more of a sudden awakening?
2. In the years since your conversion (or since your conversion began), how would you describe your relationship with Jesus? In what ways is it like “old marrieds”? How have you tried to pop “a little zing back into the relationship”?
3. What do you think of the author’s assertion that “practice preceded the belief” on p. 7? How might this awareness be an encouragement to you as you seek to deepen your faith over the next year with this book?

2 fasting in the desert

1. As Jana Riess admits: “I hate fasting” (p. 10). What is your attitude toward this spiritual practice? Have you experienced any type of fast in the past? Explain.
2. In thinking about why one should fast, Lynne Baab notes, “Fasting is not the means by which we are somehow turned into Aladdin and God is turned into our complaint genie, sent to grant our every wish.” How does this statement reflect a common sentiment toward fasting or any other religious discipline? How do people try to curry God’s favor through their habits?
3. In reflecting on her month of fasting, Riess realized that it proved most “spiritually helpful . . . [on] an ordinary Fast Sunday at my church, when everyone else was fasting too.” How does this insight help you understand the importance of fasting with others, or alone?

3 meeting Jesus in the kitchen . . . or not

1. Brother Lawrence believed in “doing little things for the love of God, since he was not capable of doing great things” (p. 28). As you look at your life, do you gravitate toward doing small things or big things for God?
2. In reflecting on cooking, the author comments, “The difference between us is that he saw cooking as an opportunity to become one with the Lord of the Universe, whereas I see it as the one snatch of my day when I can listen to *All Things Considered*.” Humor aside, do you see work as primarily a time to grow with God or is it more of a secular time? Explore this with others, if you are meeting in a group.
3. About Br. Lawrence, Riess observes, “I’m . . . glad that there is a not-quite-saint in the canon of also-rans who focused on elevating the daily chores that take up so much of my life and energy.” After reading this chapter, do you feel encouraged by his example or unimpressed? Jot down some positives and negatives, as you see them, about his spirituality.

4 lectio divination

1. “*Lectio Divina* is like your mother telling you not to bolt your food; it is about slowing down, chewing methodically, absorbing nutrients” (p. 40). Using this as a definition for *lectio*, how do you read Scripture? In what ways does this definition challenge your approach to Scripture reading?
2. In exploring how to read scripture, Peterson says, “we like the idea of the Bible and often find it sweet at first introduction. Then, as we begin to dig, it becomes increasingly less comfortable” (p. 46). What attracts you to reading Scripture? Even so, have there been times when you found it uncomfortable?
3. “Lifelong exposure to God’s word is more like a marathon than a sprint,” Riess writes. Does your scripture reading reflect more of a marathon or sprint? Does your approach to reading scripture mirror your approach to other things in life?

5 nixing shoppertainment

1. The author states, “This month I’m going to abstain from all shopping except for our weekly groceries. Anything that’s not immediately necessary—anything that’s a want and not a need” (p. 55). How would this discipline challenge you and your patterns?
2. Richard Foster writes that, “The less comfortable we are with ourselves, the more we will look to things around us for comfort.” Reflect on the truth of this statement. Has your desire for things increased or decreased in the last ten years? The last twenty years?
3. In finishing this chapter, Riess points out that the attitude of coveting underlies the drive to consume. She concludes, “The lesson Iyengar learned from this seemed counterintuitive: there is such a thing as too much choice. It turns out that we get overwhelmed easily.” What does this quote tell you about issues that may drive excess consumption? How might there be more freedom in having fewer choices?

6 Centering Prayer

1. This practice of prayer “focuses on being still” and “that we stop yammering to God about our petty concerns and take time to listen” (p. 66). How do you feel about attempting this discipline? Do you tend to fill your life with noise or is silence something you make space for?
2. In “Struggling with Centering Prayer” (pp. 70-71), the author “distinguishes between free silence, like the lovely hall-pass silence . . . and intentional silence which is about training the promiscuous, free-floating mind.” Can you see the distinction she is making between freely doing something and consciously training to do something? How do you react to controlling your thoughts?
3. Reiss talks about quitting centering prayer and being “exhausted by the artificiality of trying to pray this way. I despise its formality and coldness.” When have you tried and failed at a discipline? A spiritual discipline? How might the question “Why am I doing this?” (p. 73) be helpful?
4. Author Frederica Matthews-Green reflects that heart prayers like the Jesus Prayer “occur when the Prayer moves from merely mental repetition, forced along by your own effort, to an effortless and spontaneous self-repetition of the prayer that emanates from the core of your being” (p. 80). What do you think she means by this definition? Have you ever prayed like this?

7 unorthodox sabbath

1. Rabbi Heschel describes a proper Sabbath as being willing to “first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil . . . He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man” (p. 84). What insights does his definition offer?
2. In thinking about the benefits of keeping the Sabbath, Riess notes, “There’s something so marvelously liberating about stepping back from work, especially housework, that I actually feel *more* creative.” In thinking about a Sabbath, what tasks would be difficult for you to stop? What might be the benefits?
3. In reflecting on her Sabbath, the author notes, “I find peace in unexpected places: in the aroma of *cholent* wafting through the house, in the comfort of a long nap. And for me *shalom* also comes from rich study.” What do you make of the author’s discovery of unexpected peace? What appeals to you about her Sabbath experience? Are there ways that you might reshape your activities to reflect a more authentic Sabbath?

8 thanksgiving every day

1. On p. 98, Riess notes that “Gratitude . . . just being grateful for all the little things” is going to be “the bunny slope of my year of spiritual experiments.” In other words, she believed that it would be easy compared to the others. Initially, how did you look at gratitude as a discipline? Relatively easy or challenging?
2. In exploring the habit of being grateful, Riess warns, “If we ever catch ourselves thinking about how God should reward our sunny dispositions with worldly blessings, or imagining that if we’re not grateful . . . God will justifiably withhold future blessings . . . then we need to take a long and hard look at what we believe about God. God doesn’t owe us anything”(p. 108). Rewrite this quote in your own words. What does it mean to you?

3. Drawing on the wisdom of Thomas Merton, the author notes, “When the Bible commands us to be thankful, that gratitude is almost never about us or about the material comforts of our little lives . . . It’s about being thankful *for God* and for his ‘steadfast love’.” Where in your life have you focused your gratitude on material comforts as opposed to God himself?

9 benedictine hospitality

1. Riess explains that “This month . . . I’m going to look out for opportunities to practice hospitality . . . surely I can venture out of my comfort zone to understudy the role of Christ for a few wayfarers.” From what you’ve read up to this point, what do you understand about Benedictine hospitality? How might it refine your own definition of hospitality?
2. Pages 118-119 list instances where hospitality was lacking. What does this teach you about practicing hospitality in your own world?
3. In further defining hospitality, Riess reflects, “making guests feel welcome is about allowing them to be who they are, not who you want them to be” (p. 125). What does she mean by this? What are some practical applications in your life?
4. The author concludes, “My hospitality doesn’t have to be perfect to be effective at helping people feel loved . . . through hospitality . . . we come to know one another and maybe even glimpse the face of God.” How can you show hospitality in new ways in your own life? How does her statement show you some of the significant benefits?

10 what would Jesus eat?

1. Riess describes her next discipline by saying, “I’m not going to eat any meat . . . I reserve the right to binge on milk, cheese, yogurt, and eggs. . . . Eliminating meat from my diet is enough of a sea change for the moment.” How do you respond to this new practice? Have you ever attempted anything similar?
2. In further exploring a meatless diet, the author explains, “I admit a deep unease about my carnivorous ways. Eating animals feels immoral to me and I have been ignoring the prompting for too many years.” Can you identify with these concerns? Have you ever had similar thoughts or talked with someone who has?
3. One friend of Riess’ who did not agree with her vegetarian stance explained, “The Scriptures are clear that we’re supposed to be in charge of the animals. I just don’t know *what* the world is coming to.” Do you find yourself in agreement with her sense of our God-given dominion over animals? Take some time to explore your beliefs with others.

11 seven five three times a day will I praise you

1. As she explores praying at fixed times during the day, the author suggests, “I expect that many people in my church are suspicious of ‘rote’ prayers, which smack of Catholicism and might lead to Pharisaic vain repetition.” How do you react to the suggestion of praying certain prayers at certain times of the day? Is this part of your faith tradition?
2. In starting her prayer discipline for the month, Riess states, “there’s a certain grace in dropping whatever I’m doing and forcing myself to pray exactly on schedule. I’m supposed to be molded and shaped by this practice, not

reinvent it to shape my own needs.” Do you see times of prayer as shaping your schedule or is your life fit into your schedule? How would your life change if you stopped your work to pray at certain times?

3. The author observes about fixed hour prayer, “Maybe one reason I’m enjoying fixed-hour prayer so much is that it gives me a break from the me-me-me nature of my own spontaneous prayers. There is a deep rest associated with ancient prayers I didn’t contrive myself.” Is she saying anything, here, that you find appealing? How does her sense of “rest” depart from other forms of rest you may have sought?

12 generosity

1. “It’s my month of radical generosity, of giving liberally to all who ask. This comes from the Gospel of Luke, one of those inconvenient passages I try not to think about [Luke 6:29-30]” (p. 153). Why is this a challenging passage? On a scale of 1-10 how would you rate your current level of generosity?
2. Review again the tithing section on p. 159, through to the first paragraph of p. 161. How do you react to the concept of tithing? How about to her story of youthful tithing? What can you learn from this section that might be helpful?
3. “It’s easy to love the people far away. It is not always easy to love those close to us. . . . Bring love into your home for this is where our love for each other must start” (p. 163). Are you challenged by this Mother Teresa quote? Who are the “close to us” people that you struggle to be generous toward?

Epilogue practice makes imperfect

1. As Riess reflects on her failures in the proceeding twelve months, she notes, “those attempts at sainthood that felt like dismal failures at the time, actually took hold somehow. . . . [T]he power of spiritual practice is that it forges you stealthily, as you entertain angels unawares” (p. 168). How does this statement speak to you? Give you hope for your own spiritual growth?
2. In contrasting her life to her father’s, the author observes, “The life of the spirit is one lived for others. . . . One way to live the life of the spirit, and to offer it to God and others, is through spiritual practices—my daily commitment to implementing a different kind of life” (p. 169). How does your spirituality reflect or contrast with your parents’? Does Riess’ statement help you?
3. She concludes by saying, “I was delusional for imagining I could master any spiritual practice in thirty days.” Can you identify with her false hope? What is the answer, then—what are the best ways to put spiritual disciplines into practice in our lives.



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