



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Improving Our Seeing and Listening
(*Mysticism*, pp. 77-84)

Suggested Article:

📖 Why the Mystics Matter
(*Mysticism*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Improving Our Seeing and Listening

We must admit that we are not good at listening to God and seeing the world as God sees. Our culture does not help: it catches us up in busyness and distracts us with raucous noise and glaring lights. How will we recover our attentiveness which is essential to serving God in today's world?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:14-24

Response to the Scripture[†]

Teach us, God, to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost. To labor and not ask for reward, save in the knowledge that we do your will.

Reflection

The Apostle Paul concludes his earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians, with these instructions: "seek to do good to one another," which might mean admonishing the disorderly, encouraging the faint-hearted, or assisting the weak; and "do not quench the Spirit." The latter includes listening with care and discernment to the prophets among us, but it also involves what we might call "keeping in touch" with God's presence. We do this, Paul says, by rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks—constantly.

Keeping in touch with God's presence may seem especially difficult today because our lives are so busy and the world is so distracting. Yet "we do not have to invent something brand new," Glenn Hinson writes. "Believers have wrestled with this question for centuries and offer us ample guidance.... The Hebrew people believed that God communicates through nature, through history, and through our own lives. What we have to learn is to *see* and to *listen*." We can come to know and love God

- ▶ *Through nature.* The psalmist says that creation "[tells] the glory of God" and "proclaims his handiwork" (19:1). Yet *hearing* its proclamation is not as simple as listening to a physical sound (19:2-4), for our hearts must be attuned morally. So, Psalm 19 concludes with a confession: "But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults" (19:12). Likewise, Jesus draws object lessons from nature: the kingdom of God, he says, is like freshly sown seed or a budding tree (Mark 4:1-9; 4:26-29; 4:30-32; 13:28-32; and parallels). But he warns that one needs a discerning heart to perceive this: "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Mark 4:9, and so on).
- ▶ *Through history.* In Scripture, God communicates through *all* history, but especially in certain segments of history. "For the Jewish people, the story of stories is the exodus from Egypt," Hinson notes. "For Christians there is another story of stories—the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is no accident that Christian meditation through the centuries has focused on the Gospels, for it is they which contain the greatest story ever told."



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► *Through our own lives.* “If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us,” writes Michel Quoist, “our whole life would become prayer. To *see* and *listen* so that all of life becomes a prayer is the goal of our discipleship.

To recover our attentiveness to God, says Hinson, “through the ages the saints have come up with two solutions that are polar opposites. One is to *spend time among people who are hurting*; the other is to *draw back and spend time in solitude and in silence....* [Yet] we cannot stand an uninterrupted diet of exposure to human suffering. After a while it may harden and callous our hearts. That is why the saints have gone in the opposite direction—retreating to find solitude and silence.” He recommends four types of retreats: a *daily retreat* of meditation, a *monthly retreat* of sending a day “sparing time for God” and for ourselves; a *semi-annual retreat* for thirty-six to forty-eight hours, and a *sabbatical* “to be refreshed and renewed and re-created.”

“Relax! It’s all about Grace,” Hinson reminds us. “All too often, people who become serious about their spiritual life start straining, as if it all depended on them.” As the Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely.... The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”

Study Questions

1. How have you experienced God through nature, history, and your own life?
2. A healthy spirituality, Hinson says, balances “experiential, intellectual, social, and institutional dimensions.... Sadly, many persons think of the spiritual life as entirely a matter of experience and neglect the other elements which would account for a well-rounded approach to faith.” Which element is most developed in your life? Is one of them neglected?
3. Describe the four types of retreat that Hinson recommends. What things might you do on each sort of retreat in order to renew your attentiveness to God?
4. “Mysticism is resistance,” Dorothee Soelle writes in *The Silent Cry*. In order to stay attentive to God, what aspects of culture do we need to resist? Michael Sciretti notes that Soelle articulates three “‘vows’ of today’s mystic: ‘ego-lessness,’ ‘possessionlessness,’ and ‘nonviolence’.... [O]ur consumer ego must be freed from the values of the First World kingdom (power, possessions, and violence) if we are ever to escape from our ‘common blind captivity to the world.’” Do you agree with her list? How can meditation on a spiritual retreat help us to resist these values?
5. Comment on Frederick Bauerschmidt’s claim that the Christian mystics “matter because they can help us see and receive the deep mystery that pervades the world. They matter because they can carry us into the depths of divine love.”

Departing Hymn: “Our Deepest Prayer”

†Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556)

Improving Our Seeing and Listening

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Response to the Scripture	Response to the Scripture
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3 or 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the Apostle Paul's injunction to "pray without ceasing" in terms of staying attentive to God and seeing the world as God sees it.
2. To review how we come to know and love God through nature, history, and personal experience.
3. To discuss the variety of spiritual retreats and their importance for our discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Mysticism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Glenn Hinson tells the story of "a seventeenth-century Carmelite lay brother Nicholas Hermann, or Brother Lawrence, [who] spoke of practicing the presence of God. For about ten years after entering a Carmelite monastery, he tried the rigorous Carmelite disciplines, but they merely frustrated him. Washing dishes in the convent kitchen, he discovered that he could talk to the God of pots and pans. In everything he was doing, he could maintain an attitude of attention to the presence of God, or as he expressed it in another place, he could maintain a passionate regard for God. 'I turn my little omelet in the pan for love of God,' he said."

Hinson concludes that what Brother Lawrence "did was to fall head over heels in love with God and let that transfuse everything he was doing. Wisely, though, he reminds us that 'we must know before we love and to know God we must think often of [God]'" (*Mysticism*, pp. 77-78). How can we think often of God in our busy lives?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members would grow in listening to God and seeing the world as God sees it.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Thessalonians 5:14-24 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Stepping away from our busy lives through spiritual retreats is one of the ways that saints have taught us to recover our attentiveness to God which is essential to serving God in today's world. Glenn Hinson provides very practical guidance about making time for and planning the content of a spiritual retreat. This is an opportunity for your study group to plan a retreat together.

First of all, we come to know and love God, Hinson reminds us, through nature, history, and our personal experience. During a spiritual retreat we might focus on one of these avenues or a combination of them.

While a spiritual retreat will enhance our own experience of God's presence, it should also renew the intellectual, social, and institutional dimensions of our discipleship.

Finally, Hinson sees value in four types of retreat that vary in schedule and duration: a *daily retreat*, a *monthly retreat*, a *semi-annual retreat* for thirty-six to forty-eight hours, and a *sabbatical*.

Study Questions

1. Some members may recount dramatic experiences of God. Others will be more like Brother Lawrence, who "discovered that he could talk to the God of pots and pans. In everything he was doing, he could maintain an attitude of attention to the presence of God, or as he expressed it in another place, he could maintain a passionate regard for God." As we hear others' stories, we may become more attuned to God's presence in these three modes.

We may know and love God through nature as we travel to distant places, or when something changes how we look at familiar places. We may encounter God in history as we meditate on Scripture or learn about times of great suffering, discovery, endurance, or joy in history (e.g., the Holocaust, fall of the Berlin Wall, sacrifice in exploration, signing a peace treaty, etc.). We may encounter God not only in meditative experiences, but also in celebrating a child's birth, grieving a loved one's death, enduring a disability, or serving others.

2. The *experiential* dimension "is first and foremost a matter of opening to accept God's love," Hinson writes. "That is what prayer is." The *intellectual* aspect includes reading, study, and meditation. The *social* aspect involves "meeting human need wherever or in whatever form we find it. Multitudes of Christians have experienced their most significant spiritual growth as they have forgotten themselves and followed Jesus into the world." The *institutional* aspect includes worship—"most persons will depend on regular gatherings for the nurturing of their spiritual life," Hinson notes—but also our service of the world through building and maintaining Christian hospitals, schools, and social services.

How does the neglect of one dimension affect the others? If one is neglected, how does your congregation help members strengthen and develop that dimension?

3. Encourage members to report on their experience in spiritual retreats. In a half-hour *daily retreat* we might meditate on a passage of Scripture, pray for someone, practice wordless "centering prayer," write in a spiritual journal, or reflect on a short devotional reading. During longer *monthly* or *semi-annual retreats* we can get away from our daily responsibilities to spend time in guided conversation and prayer with spiritual friends, study of a classic of Christian spiritual writing, or watching and reflecting on a movie or play. Several Christian publishers offer books of guided readings to structure these multi-day retreats. On a *sabbatical* of several weeks or months duration, we might visit a retreat center, follow a course of spiritual study, or explore another avenue of Christian service.
4. An early Christian list of culture's distorting values, which overlaps with Soelle's list, is the seven capital vices: lust, gluttony, greed, anger, envy, spiritual apathy, and pride. On a spiritual retreat, we might set aside time for reading, conversations, and personal reflection to make us more aware of these distorting values. Journaling can help us articulate how we are captured by them and how we intend to change our patterns of living, and prayer can bring our concerns before God for divine guidance and grace to resist them.
5. Sciretti says this about Bauerschmidt's claim: "As we apply teachings of the mystics to our lives, we must be careful not to turn to them for purely pragmatic reasons, such as to cope with the problems of the modern world. While coping skills are good, living in loving intimacy with God is about much more" (*Mysticism*, p. 93). The same word of caution applies to spiritual retreats: we should not value them only for pragmatic reasons, such as relieving stress, resting from a busy schedule, and so on.

Departing Hymn

"Our Deepest Prayer" is on pp. 47-49 of *Mysticism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.