Ignatian Winter Workout Group, Week 1—Setting Spiritual Exercise Goals

Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.—Jesus (Matthew 7:7)

“Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible.”—Tony Robbins

“...at the beginning of each prayer period, Ignatius advises that we pray for a certain grace, or gift from God: ‘ask God our Lord for what I want and desire’ (SE 48). Simply naming what we deeply desire opens us to receive the gift God wants to give us. Moreover, praying for a grace helps us to notice when we actually receive that gift later on. In this way, we realize that the grace is not of our own making but is the result of God’s generosity to us. Finally, praying out of our desires grounds us in the present, keeping our prayer ‘real.’”—Kevin O’Brien SJ, The Ignatian Adventure (26)

Questions for discussion:

- What has been your experience of physical exercise? Do you find this to be a helpful metaphor for spirituality? Why or why not?
- Do you regularly practice goal-setting in your life (in fitness, for class, for your career, etc.)?
  - If so, what do you like about this practice?
  - If not, what prevents you from doing so?
- Share a story about a goal that you set for yourself and eventually achieved. What lessons did you take away from that experience?
- A workout goal is to physical fitness as “naming the grace” is to spiritual fitness. How does this idea sit with you? What does “grace” mean to you? Why do you think Ignatius chose this word?
- What is one grace that you are considering naming during the season of Lent?

For further prayer & action:

- Spend some time this week reflecting on your short-term spiritual goals. What would you like to be intentional about during the season of Lent?
- If you are having trouble thinking of goals, spend some time thinking about your deepest desires (think 360 Retreat!). Jesuit priest James Martin believes that the “deep longings of our hearts are our holy desires. Not only desires for physical healing, but also the desires for change, for growth, for a fuller life. Our deepest desires, those desires that lead us to become who we are, are God’s desires for us.”
- A critical step in setting goals is being able to break down large goals into smaller, more manageable goals. How would you like your life to look spiritually in 10 years? 5 years? 3 years? 1 year? 1 month? Give yourself some time & space to really dream big and imagine what your life could look like. Jot down some notes (the more detailed, the better!) to help you remember your dreams.
- Think about what might get you motivated for setting other kinds of goals: an inspiring movie? making a playlist of inspiring music? reading inspirational quotes? sharing your goals with a trusted friend? journal about how you might feel when you achieve your goal? Consider using these same practices to get you inspired as you name your grace.
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Featured prayer practice of the week: Name the Grace

Naming something that you want from God may seem like a funny way of praying, but it is in fact prayer! Ignatius saw this kind of prayer as integral to his *Spiritual Exercises.*

Author Andy Otto helps unpack this idea:

This is a kind of prayer, but by using the “grace” language, we acknowledge it only as gift. Grace is always a free gift from God and can manifest in many forms. On the surface the fruit of a grace may seem invisible, but upon reflection one may discover that a grace asked for a month ago was somehow fulfilled. It may be fulfilled in a small feeling you felt, in a smile someone gave, in a new insight you received.

Grace—certainly in Ignatius’ terms—are typically things that can be affectively felt. You can’t ask for the “grace of winning the lottery” but you can ask for the grace of feeling rich in love. You can’t ask for the “grace of a job promotion” but you can ask for the grace of a deeper appreciation for your work or vocation. Those kinds of graces can be felt internally. In the Third Week of the Spiritual Exercises in a contemplation on Christ’s Passion Ignatius asks retreatants to pray for the grace of sorrow. Sometimes the gift of feeling grief is necessary, sometimes it’s feeling joy.

Consider tomorrow morning when you are getting ready for the day, What do I really desire today? Ask God for that grace, go about your day, and then before bed take a few minutes to review your day and see if you received it. Keep a journal of graces you ask for and you’ll start seeing how God works in your life, cares for you, and provides to you what you need as free gift.¹

As you prepare for Lent this week, spend some time reflecting on how you would like to use this season in an intentional way to grow spiritually. Spend some time reflecting a bit more on the reflection questions that guided this week’s discussion (reverse side). Sit with the “For further prayer & action” items. Journal about whatever thoughts come to mind. Trust that God will gradually place a grace on your heart and invite you to name it.

And when you are ready, name the grace. Write it down in a place where you can revisit it regularly—in your journal, on your phone, or on an index card placed near your bed, desk, or bathroom mirror. Pray a simple prayer by asking God for the grace you would like to receive during this season.

Take it a step further: set aside a few quiet moments for an imaginative prayer. Imagine Jesus waiting eagerly to hear your goals and desires; tell him the grace you want. Imagine how he responds to the grace you ask for. If you need to, remind yourself of the words he spoke to his followers: “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”