

PRAISING THE HOURS

Spiritual Disciplines: Personal

Introduction:

Fixed hours of prayer were very common throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and practiced very much throughout the early church. Jesus prayed the Shema (Deut 6:8) in the morning and the blessings in the afternoon. The evening would consist of both of these prayers in addition to bringing petitions before God. David prayed seven times a day (Ps 119:164); Daniel prayed three times a day (Dan 6:10); and Jesus and his disciples practiced devout Jewish times of prayer, at least, going to the temple to pray at noon and three. Early Christian manuscripts for Christian practice call for praying the Lord's Prayer three times a day.

Specific and intentional times of prayer throughout the day have always been a part of the people of God. It was a constant and continual theme, not as a demand but as a spiritual rhythm to face each part of the day being reminded and refocused by encountering God through prayer.

St. Benedict was well known for structuring hours of prayer for communities of men and women that have been going on for more than 1,600 years. He incorporated work and prayer "To pray is to work, to work is to pray." Benedictines would pray through scripture as a means of sanctification of all time and effort. They would add 8 times during a 24 hour period to stop and intentionally "pray the hours."

It might not be necessary to hit every one of those 8 stops during the day, but to have intentional times that have been marked out throughout each day to stop and pray will certainly give reason and holy perspective to the various aspects of the day.

Questions for Reflection and Understanding:

1. Do you have specific times of the day that you pray? (morning? bedtime?) What is important to you about those times?
2. How are you reminded on any given day that life is more than work, food, entertainment, money, getting things done, etc...?
3. If you have children, do you have specific times that you pray with them? What is your hope for those times with your children?
4. What do you think about memorized prayers or praying prayers from the Bible or pre-written from others?
5. What makes a prayer an "authentic" prayer?

Practice Praying:

1. If you don't have a set time of prayer each day, make one. Start easy with the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and simply set a time and read it out loud. Every day, let the words drip with more meaning in what you are confessing and what you are asking and what you are proclaiming. Think about each word as you pray through this prayer.
2. If you have a set time or two that you pray every day, seek to add one more specific time of prayer to your day. Set up alarms or timers on your phones, look for a time or two during the day that you can practice one more time of prayer. After a week, evaluate any changes in thoughts or actions that you've noticed.
3. There are opportunities for additional resources to pray the hours. The Benedictines would pray through the entire Bible in a year and the Psalms once a month. There are numerous resources listed below to help with praying the hours.

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4. Bring in community. Find at least one of these times to ask a friend or a spouse to pray with you using either pre-written liturgical prayers or scripture or just praying spontaneously. It might just be a few minutes, but practice praying together.
5. David talks in the Psalms about the “watches of the night.” Whereas we don’t need to set an alarm to pray in the middle of the night, know that God is still there, still cares and is still standing watch. We are not left isolated, but we are invited into solitude because our Heavenly Father is still up. If you are woken up in the middle of the night, perhaps walk into the “watches of the night” rather than distraction or fretting. Pray in this intimate setting for what God might bring to mind.

Resources:

Every Moment Holy by Douglas McKelvey
The Divine Hours by Phyllis Tickle
Praying the Hours by Suanne Guthrie
Celtic Daily Prayer
The Lord’s Prayer – Matthew 6:9-13
Colossians 1:15-23

Here are sample prayers for morning, noonday, evening and night:

Morning Grace:

Good morning, O God! Thank you that the sun is rising and the night has not won! Thank you for standing in my stead through the watches of the night. God, may I know and remember your grace this morning as I prepare to face the day. Remind me that my value does not come from my successes or failures, but because Christ has loved me. Give me eyes to see a world in need of the love I have received and help and equip me to join you here as I labor, serve and love throughout this day.

Noonday Wisdom:

God, in the midst of this day, renew my strength. I have made a lot of decisions today, and I have a lot more decisions to make. My temptation is to take the path of least resistance, so help me and equip me to keep my eyes on you. The decisions involving my time, my attention, my rest and my joy are important. May your wisdom fill my mind to see where and how my friends, my family, my neighbors, my coworkers and this world need your light and how my decisions and/or my presence might shine that light.

Evening Hospitality:

God, I am tired. Whether or not my labor today was fulfilling or complete, you will amplify the work done in your name and will overcome and redeem the labor I have left undone. May I rest in your calling, your forgiveness and your completed work. As we enter the evening hours, you continue to welcome me, beaten and bruised, tired and sore. My temptation might be to escape and self medicate; lead me to rest and not to escape. Renew my strength to welcome a world around me in need of company as you have welcomed me. Be the bearer of my burdens that I might walk with others in confession and community, in love and in hope. You have welcomed me to your table, help me first to feast. Then, in response, may I open my table to those around me.

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Watches of the Night:

God, thank you for the gift of another day. My mind and my body are tired and I need rest because you designed me with limitations, to be dependent and to trust you. My body is meant for both work and rest. Lord, through the darkness of the night, let me rest in the knowledge that you stand guard through the watches of the night, I have no fear. Still my anxious thoughts. Bring peace to my full or weary heart. Keep any temptations far from me. You will not leave nor forsake your people in the darkness. I am one of your people and your promises are sure. Renew my strength to fight and labor and love and serve again tomorrow.

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