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 Jim Baker



**20 Practices To Nurture The Inner Spiritual Life**

**Spiritual Practices…….Seeking Greater Connection With God**

It was while reading Richard Foster’s, *Celebration of Discipline* that it first struck me that the Christian faith is more of a quest than a destination and that in this centuries old journey people of the Christian tradition have developed spiritual practices to seek greater communion and connection with God. As a result, there is a rich diversity of Christian spiritual practices, heavily influenced by times, circumstances, and the people who have met God in the midst of these practices.

Incorporating these new ways (to me) of praying, meditating, reflecting, experiencing, and reading scripture fueled a closer relationship with God and a new passion for the inner spiritual life than I had ever imagined possible. Marjorie Thompson, author of *Soul Feast*, describes the inner spiritual life as “simply the increasing vitality and sway of God’s Spirit in us. It is a magnificent choreography of the Holy Spirit and the human spirit, moving us toward communion with both Creator and creation. The inner spiritual life is thus grounded in relationship. It has to do with God’s way of relating to us and our way of responding to God.”

Words like discipline, exercise, and practice are common metaphors for God communing and connecting activities. I prefer the term “practice” because of its relationship to the athletic imagery used by the Apostle Paul. As with any sport, the more you practice, the better you get. You get in better spiritual shape the more you practice. You can listen to countless sermons and read innumerable books, but true transformation and real communion with the Creator happens only as we practice spiritual activities that connect us to God and His ways.

Most of us have experienced the benefit of practicing an instrument, sport, skill, or game and becoming better and better as a result. I suggest you think of the spiritual life in the same way, committing to practice regularly a few of the 25 Spiritual Practices below. Some, like Lectio Divina and the Jesus Prayer, have been practiced for centuries. Others are more contemporary and individualized expressions and variations of classic spiritual practices. What is the payoff? Henri Nouwen describes it best:

*In the spiritual life, the word “discipline” means “the effort to create some space in which God can act.” Discipline means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up. Discipline means that somewhere you are not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied. In the spiritual life, discipline means to create space in which something can happen that you hadn’t planned or counted on.*

There you have it. Incorporating new spiritual practices into your spiritual regimen can create the space for a mystical connection, communion, and union with God that allows for something to happen that you hadn’t planned or counted on!

**Inner Conversation As A Spiritual Practice**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

In his book, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Jean-Pierre de Caussade says, “Every moment we live through is like an ambassador that declares the will of God to us. If we understood how to see in each moment some manifestation of the will of God we should find therein all that our hearts could desire. If we were attentive and watchful God would reveal Himself to us, and we would see His divine action in everything that happened to us and rejoice in it.” There is no more infallible way to seek the will of God than by seeing the grace of God in each moment. If we did nothing more than that, de Cassaude says, we would attain the highest levels of transformation. Everything in life is to be welcomed as somehow the expression of the will of God. Your reaction to whatever happens has to be “as if” it were the will of God, or you can’t respond to it graciously.

How can we live like this? I find living and seeing God in the moment increasingly difficult in a hyper extroverted, input intensive world. But, engaging in an inner conversation each week that reviews the events that have occurred and looks for the meaning and wisdom to be extracted is achievable. I find this consistently is the most important conversation I have each week…..the one with myself and God.

**Inner Conversation Questions**

During inner conversations, your engagement with other people is suspended, as you reflect upon the week and strive to see God in all its moments. Gordon MacDonald has provided a series of questions I have adapted to focus my thoughts and reflect on where God has been working in my life in recent days.

* What were the beautiful moments this week in which God may have been revealing himself to me? And what were the evil moments when the worst in me or in the larger world showed itself?
* What happened this week that needs to be remembered, perhaps recorded in a journal so I can return to it in the future and recall the blessing or the rebuke of God?
* What have my prevailing feelings been? Has there been a preponderance of sadness, of fear, of anger, of emptiness? Or has it been a time where joy and enthusiasm has been the dominant mood?
* What have been the "blessings," those acts of grace that have come through others or—as I perceive it—directly from God himself? How can I express praise and appreciation?
* Have things happened for which I need to accept responsibility, perhaps leading to repentance? Why did they happen? Were they avoidable and how can they be prevented in the future?
* What have been the thoughts that have dominated my think-time? Noble thoughts? Escapist thoughts that woo me away from more important or challenging issues? Superficial thoughts that lead nowhere?
* Is there a possibility that I am living in denial of certain realities that occurred this week? Painful criticism, sloppy work, habitual patterns that are hurting me and others?
* Were there any resentments or ill feelings toward others that surfaced this week and remain unaddressed, unforgiven?
* As I was in the company of my spouse, children, friends, and colleagues this week - was I a pleasant person to be around? Were people challenged, elevated, and enthused by my presence? As someone has observed, "Some people bring joy wherever they go; others bring joy when they go." Which was I?
* What was God trying to say to me this week? Through Scripture? Through other readings? What has he been saying through those in my inner circle of relationships? Through critics? What insights arise? Which of them needs to be repudiated, and which needs to be cultivated?
* Was I mindful this week of the socially awkward, the poor, the suffering, the oppressed in my local world and in the larger world? Was I in tune with world events and perceiving them through a biblical perspective?

Church leaders must acknowledge the indispensable need for adding to their calendar a regular time for an inner conversation with themselves and God. For as Oswald Chambers so profoundly wrote, “The battle is won in the secret places of the will before God.”

**Praying Our Experiences As A Spiritual Practice**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

Praying our experiences as a spiritual practice is an invitation to open our lives to God. In his little book, “Praying Our Experiences,” Joseph Schmidt shows how our experiences can become the content of our prayers and can lead to a newfound oneness with God. By focusing on praying our personal experiences prayer becomes a total experience, bringing together the many strands that make up our lives. Praying our experiences is opening ourselves to God in order to know ourselves as God knows us and to love ourselves and others as God loves through the experiences of our life.

Schmidt advocates that we pray with our life experiences in mind, telling our story to God much as St. Augustine, Teressa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux did in their autobiographies. As our story is enfolded into the providence of God’s story, our true identity and calling is revealed. Schmidt believes that these stories can become prayers of the heart and are founded and rooted in our life experiences. And, that sincere reflection on these stories of the ordinary experiences of our lives has a prayer value. Let’s take a closer look at how Schmidt suggests we might approach praying our experiences.

**The Method Of Praying Our Experiences**

Praying our experiences as a spiritual practice is referring to focusing on our own life experiences as the subject matter of our personal prayer time. Reflecting on our experiences with honesty and with a sense of anticipation and discovery is at the heart of the process of praying our experiences. Also, using Scripture as a light to further explore, clarify and illuminate our experiences adds depth and meaning to the practice of praying our experiences.

Praying our experiences is by nature reflective. That is, we begin by thinking about or meditating on a particular life experience. The situation might be a joyful or a painful one. For example, you might pray the experience of a hurtful argument you had with a family member or friend. Now that you are on the back side of the argument you are more calm and willing to bring the experience before the Lord. You simply recall the incident and open yourself to welcome the truth God wants to reveal to you about the experience. You are willing to allow God to enlighten you, improve you, or guide you in your next steps. In praying this experience you might explore your feelings leading up to, during and after the argument and any unmet needs of yours that aroused your anger and contributed to your hostility. You might recall how Jesus told us to deal with our enemy and how to address any situation where we feel wronged. By honestly searching our motives and what is going on inside of us, we enfold our story into the truth of the Gospel, the Spirit of Truth that is within us calling us to be our truest and best self.

Of course, not just difficult experiences have to form the content of our prayers. We can pray our joys and our victories as well, and become more thankful and more aware of God’s grace and goodness.

**What Are The Benefits Of Praying Our Experiences?**

As praying our experiences becomes an integral part of our prayer life, we begin to more clearly see our motivations, priorities, and values, our goodness as well as our duplicity. As we grow in self-knowledge we begin to experience God’s blessings, are moved to offer our praise and thanksgiving to God, and to welcome His transforming power. As we embrace our experiences and become more aware of our blessedness and our brokenness, we become more aware of the gracious and loving presence of God in action in our daily living. Praying our experiences puts us in the company of the holy men and women of the Scriptures. Job, Mary, and most notably, Jesus himself intuitively prayed their experiences. It can become our way of praying as well.

**Praying Scripture As A Spiritual Practice**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

When you pray does it ever feel like you’re just saying the same old things over and over? Praying the words of Scripture just might be your answer. In his little book, “Praying The Bible,” Donald Whitney offers a practical and biblical approach to both personal and public prayer. Praying the words of Scripture has the power to transform your prayer life and invigorate intimacy with God. Praying Scripture can strengthen and encourage your spiritual walk. Let’s turn our attention to the method Whitney advocates.

**The Method**

To pray the Bible, you simply go through the passage line by line, talking to God about whatever comes to mind as you read the text. You speak to the Lord about everything that occurs to you as you slowly read each passage. The goal is not Bible intake, but rather God focused prayer. Every thought that enters your mind as you are reading a passage of Scripture, even if that thought has nothing to do with the text, is something you may bring to God. If a verse doesn’t speak to you, then go to the next verse. Nothing says you have to pray over every verse. And, at times you will never get past the first verse you read. But, probably most common is when you will go through many verses or chapters and only a few will prompt clear direction for your prayers. That’s why this method is so simple, and anyone can do it.

Another reason praying Scripture is so practical is that it expands or contracts to accommodate the time you have for prayer. So, it works for a multi-day spiritual retreat, or the few minutes you have before you begin your day. Better yet, it prompts you to use new words and phrases that have a supernatural quality because they are inspired words.

**Where To Begin**

Whitney contends that as a whole, the Psalms comprise the best place from which to pray Scripture. The reasoning is that the Psalms were inspired by God for the purpose of being sung to God. In other words, God gave the Psalms to us to give the Psalms back to God. No other book of the Bible was inspired for that expressed purpose. As we pray the Psalms, we are returning to God the words He inspired for us to speak and sing to Him.

Another reason the Psalms are good place to begin praying Scripture is that every doctrine in the Bible is there in some form. Also, within the scope of 150 Psalms, you find reflected the entire range of human emotions that will trigger different prayers depending upon your current circumstances.

A second place to consider for easing into praying Scripture are the prayers of the Apostle Paul. These can be prayed exactly as written or used to prompt similar prayers for yourself or others. Examples can be found in Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philippians 1:9-11.

By beginning with the Psalms or the prayers of Paul you will develop a familiarity that will soon allow you to turn to any part of the Bible and pray through that passage.

Remember, when you pray the Bible, you aren’t just praying ordinary words, you are praying words of life. The Lord Jesus Christ prayed the Scriptures…..why not you?

**Spiritual Practice: Abandoning To The Will Of God**

**By Jim Baker, Sacred Structures.org**

"How can I discern God's will for my life?" "How can I be sure of God's guidance in my decisions?" "God, what should I do?" All believers have asked questions like these. For many of us, the question of God's will rarely enters into our decisions apart from those critical times when we realize that a specific decision could affect the rest of our lives. Because the consequences of a wrong choice at a point like this could be momentous, we suddenly begin to haphazardly pursue and frequently agonize over God's will on the matter. But, is there a better approach?

Jesuit priest Walter Ciszek (1904–1984) author of, He Leadeth Me, offers a simple way to discern God’s will. “The soul who each day makes a morning offering of all the prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day—and who then acts upon it by accepting unquestioningly and responding lovingly to all the situations of the day as truly sent by God—has perceived with an almost childlike faith the profound truth about the will of God. . . . God’s will for us is clearly revealed in every situation of every day, if only we could learn to view all things as God sees them.”

Ciszek goes on to say, “The challenge lies in learning to accept this truth and act upon it, every moment of every day. The trouble is that like all great truths, it seems too simple. It is there before our noses all the time, while we look elsewhere for more subtle answers. It bears the hallmark of all divine truths, simplicity, and yet it is precisely because it seems so simple that we are prone to overlook it or ignore it in our daily lives. For what can ultimately trouble the soul that accepts every moment of every day as a gift from the hands of God?”

In his book, Abandonment to Divine Providence, Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675 -1751) similarly says, “Every moment we live through is like an ambassador that declares the will of God to us. If we understood how to see in each moment some manifestation of the will of God we should find therein all that our hearts could desire. If we were attentive and watchful, God would reveal Himself to us, and we would see His divine action in everything that happened to us and rejoice in it. There is not a moment in which God does not present Himself under the cover of some pain to be endured, of some consolation to be enjoyed, or of some duty to be performed. All that takes place within us, around us, or through us, contains and conceals His divine action. If we have abandoned ourselves to God, there is only one rule for us: the duty of living with faith, humility and love in the present moment.”

Ciszek and de Caussade seem to agree that there is no more infallible way to seek the will of God than by seeing the sovereignty and grace of God in each moment. Everything in life is to be welcomed as somehow the expression of the will of God. And, your response to whatever happens has to be “as if” it were the will of God, or you can’t respond to it graciously and obediently.

Charles de Foucauld once wrote a prayer that expresses the spiritual attitude of abandonment to the will of God.

*Father, I abandon myself into your hands, do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you;*

*I am ready for all, I accept all. Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.*

*I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my soul;*

*I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,*

*to surrender myself into your hands without reserve, and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.*

Henri Nouwen says of this prayer, “It seems good to pray this prayer often. These are words of a holy man, and they show the way I must go. I realize that I can never make this prayer come true by my own efforts. But the Spirit of Jesus given to me can help me pray it and grow to its fulfillment. I know that my inner peace depends on my willingness to make this prayer my own.”

**Spiritual Practice: Be Still And Know**

**By Jim Baker, Sacred Structures.org**

A favorite spiritual practice of mine that allows one to go deeper by pulling together the head and heart, left and right brain, and the rational and contemplative mind is that of repeating, chanting, or meditating on Holy Scripture. In this particular exercise we repeat a familiar passage from Psalm 46 and take away one word at a time. As we do, it slowly takes us down from conceptual thinking to just being.

To begin, bring yourself into a posture of reverence and silence. Then repeat or chant slowly:

***Be still and know that I am God.***

***Be still and know that I am.***

***Be still and know.***

**Be still.**

**Be.**

Repeat this exercise at least three times. Close by sitting for a few minutes in silence.

If you want to go deeper with this practice, pay close attention to a word or phrase that repeatedly speaks to you. Write it down and place it in your pocket or purse. Come back to this word or phrase throughout the day, being present to its insights, impact and invitation.

**Spiritual Practice: Imaginative Meditation**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Society of Jesus, wrote a classic devotional book called “Spiritual Exercises.” In this book, he commends a specific approach to prayer that emphasizes the use of the imagination as a way of praying. Instead of reciting words to Jesus, you take a Gospel story and visualize the story in your mind’s eye including all of the different characters, sights, sounds and smells. Imaginatively place yourself in the midst of the story as one of the characters or as a bystander. Smell the incense burning, feel the dusty road beneath your feet, feel the sun on your face, and listen to the words of Jesus as if he is speaking directly to you. The purpose of Ignatian prayer is so we might encounter Jesus through the medium of our minds and our capacity for visualization and imagination. Below is a five step process for imaginative prayer.

**A Five Step Imaginative Meditation Exercise**

Premise: Placing oneself into the biblical text and interacting with the text through the imagination and the five senses allows one to fully experience the text.

Step 1: Select

Choose a passage of Scripture rich in imagery such as John 1:35-42; John 21:1-14; Mark 9:1-12.

Step 2: Settle

Find a quiet place and situate yourself in a spot that is conducive to sacred reading. As you sit comfortably with your eyes closed, let yourself settle down. Let go of all the thoughts, tensions and sensations you may feel and simply rest in the love of God. Deliberately call on the name of Jesus to help you select a passage and to illuminate it for you.

Step 3: Read and Imagine

Select and read slowly and repeatedly a biblical story, pausing periodically to picture the scene and savor what you are reading. Using all five senses imagine the geography, the smells, tastes, sights and the sounds. Imagine the personalities and listen to the conversations taking place.

Step 4: Converse

Place yourself into the story and converse with the characters and respond to their questions. Respond to God in prayer about the meaning of the emotions and sensations that you are experiencing and again ask God for illumination.

Step 5: Reflect

If in a group, share aloud your experience and the feelings and sensations that were evoked and the insights you gleaned. If alone, take the time to journal, paint, sculpt or draw the scene you imagined.

**Spiritual Practice: Jesus’ Rhythms Exercise**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

Read from the selected passages that mention times Jesus goes into solitude (to lonely places, a garden, a boat, or a mountain) alone or with some of his disciples.

For context, read a few verses before and after the passage listed.

Luke 5:15-16; Luke 6:12-13; Luke 9:18; Luke 9:28

Matthew 14:23; Matthew 5:1

Mark 1:12-13; Mark 1:35-38; Mark 6:31-32; Mark 6:45-47

John 6:15; John 7:10

Second, try to envision what Jesus may have been thinking, praying and doing during these times, keeping in mind the circumstances just before and after his time of solitude.

After reading the Scripture, use the following questions as a guide for reflection.

1. What was Jesus’ practice of being with his Father like? What kind of effort did Jesus make to have it? When and where did he go? What did he do in those times?
2. What was Jesus doing immediately before and after each of these times of solitude?
3. What do these details suggest about what he may have been praying about and reflecting on? What might he have been bringing to the Father?
4. What does this study suggest for your own life rhythms as you face the demands and pressures of your life?
5. Did you identify the following rhythms?
* He would **Rest** (in God) then he would (be energized to) **Act**
* He would **Receive** (from God) then he would (be empowered to) **Give**
* He would **Listen** (to God) then he would (have a message to) **Speak**

**Spiritual Practice: Lectio Divina**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

One of the great treasures of the Christian tradition of prayer is *Lectio Divina*, an ancient Christian form of meditative prayer that is being rediscovered in our time. *Lectio Divina* is a Latin term meaning “holy, divine, or sacred reading,” which is reading we believe to be divinely inspired. This tradition of prayer comes from a Hebrew method of studying the Scriptures which was called *haggadah*. *Haggadah* was an interactive interpretation of the Scriptures by means of the free use of the text to explore its inner meaning. It was part of the devotional practice of the Jews in the days of Jesus. The following steps are named in Latin with an English interpretation:

***Lectio* (Reading):** Listen with your heart as well as your ears. Which words seem to rest on your heart? Jump out at you? What did the Scripture mean then? In the first phase of *lectio divina* we understand what the passage we are reading says in itself. This is the literal meaning of the Scripture passage and the lessons everyone should recognize in reading it. At this stage we do not yet consider our own lives in connection with the Scriptures. We do not let our opinions influence our reading, but seek to understand the message of the passage as interpreted by the Church independently of anyone’s opinions. This phase is summarized with the question: *What does the text say that everyone should understand?*

***Meditatio* (Meditation):** Transfer to my place in life today.....the same scripture passage may mean different things on different days to different people.....be open. In the meditation phase of *lectio divina*, we ask, *what does this text say to me, today, and to my life?* We allow God to pull up certain memories of people, places, and events in our lives that relate to the passage we are reading. Meditation is also an opportunity to see ourselves in the text. We can consider our own feelings as if we were a participant in the text or try to understand what it would be like to be one of the people represented in the text. In this way we come to a deeper appreciation of how God is working in our lives through the sacred word. Having entered into the story ourselves, we can return to the present and consider the areas in our own lives that God is calling us to contemplate.

***Oratio* (Prayer):** Make up a simple prayer using the phrase that “spoke to you from the Scripture.” You can share this with the group or keep it private. Through a meditation on Scripture, we experience an intimate encounter with God that leads us to respond in prayer. Having met our Lord in his holy word, we courageously speak to him in our own words. In this way we consider prayer to be a simple conversation with God. It is a conversation that comes in various forms: we ask petitions (or requests) of him, we give him thanks, and we give him praise. We might also ask for the intercession of Mary or the saints represented in the passage we read. At this phase we can ask ourselves: *What can I say to the Lord in response to his word?*

***Contemplatio* (Contemplation):** Time to be quiet again and listen to the Lord. In what direction is this Scripture passage taking me? Discernment is a very important part of this step.....keep tuned into the Lord. Ask the Holy Spirit’s help. A true encounter with the Lord always leads to transformation. Indeed, the Lord God proclaimed, “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:5). Through contemplation we come to an understanding of the parts of our lives that need to be transformed by God’s grace. We humble ourselves and open our lives up to his transformative power. This step comes with the willingness to change, an openness and trust in God, and the decision to follow God’s will rather than our own. With this decision comes a fear of losing what we find comfortable and safe. At the same time we feel the excitement of a call to heroic adventure and a hopeful future of living the life we are meant to live. At this step in the *lectio divina* process, we ask ourselves: *What conversion of the mind, heart, and life is the Lord asking of me?*

**Actio (Action):** An action step that may come to you now or sometime during the next week...don’t need to rush this. How is the Lord asking me to act on this Scripture? In what direction is the Holy Spirit guiding me?

**Spiritual Practice: Paying Attention To Your Breath**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

Meditation, yoga, and other stress-reducing therapies teach that slowing down and focusing on the timing and pace of our breath can have positive effects on our body and mind. A recent study in the *Journal of Neurophysiology* may support this, revealing that brain regions linked to emotion, attention, and body awareness are activated when we pay attention to our breath. This study raises the possibility that particular breathing strategies may be used as a tool to help people to manage their thoughts, moods, and experiences.

Christian mystics and contemplatives have long known that paying attention to one’s breath can be a powerful spiritual practice. Let’s take a look at one of the most widely known - *The YHWH Breath Prayer.*

***The YHWH Breath Prayer* As A Spiritual Practice**

Centuries ago Jewish people concluded that the name of God should not be spoken at all. The Sacred Tetragrammaton, YHWH, was not ever to be pronounced with the lips. Many Jews believe that God’s name is not pronounceable, but only breathable: YH on the captured in-breath, and WH on the offered out-breath.

God cannot be captured or controlled, but only received and shared as freely as the breath itself—the thing we have done since the moment we were born and will do until the day we die. Yet, God is as available and accessible as our breath itself. Jesus breathes the Spirit into us as the very air of life (see John 20:22). Our job is simply to both receive and give this life-breath. We cannot only inhale, and we cannot only exhale. We must breathe in and out, a metaphor for accepting and letting go in the YHWH Breath Prayer.

As a spiritual practice, take several minutes to pause and breathe mindfully, surrendering to the mystery and invisibility of air, the sustainer of life. Open your lips; relax your jaw and tongue. Listen to the air flow in and out of your mouth and lungs as you inhale and exhale.

**Inhale: yh
Exhale: wh**

Breathe in and out words that describe the character and nature of God. For example, breathe in God’s love for you, breathe out God’s love to others. Breathe in God’s grace towards you, breathe out God’s grace towards others. Breathe in God’s compassion for you, breathe out God’s compassion to others. Throughout the day let your breathing in and out be your prayer to—and from—God.

**Restoring Midrash As A Spiritual Practice**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

The word *Midrash* is a Hebrew term with several different definitions, but perhaps the most ancient definition is the one that draws my attention. That is when *Midrash* is used as a mode of scriptural interpretation in which many different exegetical methods are employed in an effort to derive deeper meaning from a text.

In this context *Midrash* is a biblical exegesis method used by ancient Hebrew rabbis and scholars to interpret Hebrew scripture in which they reflected on a passage to communicate all of its underlying and truest message(s).  *Midrash* is a way of interpreting Scripture that questions and imagines several possible interpretations. *Midrash* allows the text and the Spirit of God to open up the reader, instead of closing down other possibilities by latching onto one final and certain interpretation. *Midrash* allows many levels of faith-filled meaning……meaning that is relevant and applicable to the reader, and puts you into the passage to build understanding. Jewish commentaries on Scripture reflect this method by using phrases such as, "It could mean this, and it could mean that, and why don't we think about it this way for a while?" The goal was not to resolve absolutely one final and authoritative interpretation of a passage, but to thoroughly "mine" the text for all of its possible spiritual meaning.

**Using Midrash As A Spiritual Practice**

To try the *Midrash* approach to Scripture, enter your reading with a sense of curiosity, patience, openness, and humility. Let the passage challenge *you*. Ask questions such as: What does this ask of me? How might this apply to my current life circumstances, to my work, to my calling, to my marriage, to my family, to my church, to my community, to my country?

To discover potentially hidden meaning examine various ways the passage might be interpreted: Culturally, Contextually, Literally, Poetically, Historically, Geographically, Linguistically, Metaphorically, Narratively, Allegorically, Symbolically, Morally, Symbolically, Poetically, Theologically, Analogy? These different lens of Scripture interpretation might be compared to our human senses of hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and touching……five distinct ways of experiencing and knowing the same thing, but in very different “languages.” Read the text in different translations, letting the subtleties of each translation speak to you. Read different commentaries on a passage focusing on different perspectives, meanings, and insights.

As you practice *Midrash* keep in mind that people at different levels of spiritual and emotional development will interpret the same text in different ways. The *self* that you bring to your reading of the Scriptures impacts how you will interpret the text. Who are you when you read the Bible? Is it a defensive *self*? An angry *self*? An offensive *self*? A power-hungry *self*? A controlling *self*? A shameful *self*? A righteous *self*? A humble *self*? An honest *self*? An open *self*? A loving *self*? This is why it is so vital that we pray and reflect before reading the Bible.

I can easily imagine that it was the 12 year old Jesus’ ability to apply a form of *Midrash* to the Scriptures that amazed the Hebrew scholars in the temple courts. The story found in Luke 2 says that Jesus asked questions and that the teachers were amazed at his understanding and his answers. Sounds a lot like *Midrash* to me.

Further, the Gospels show that throughout his ministry Jesus practiced *Midrash,*consistently using questions that led to spiritual meanings, often reflecting on a text, or returning people's questions with more questions. And, Matthew 13:34 says, "He would never speak to them except in parables." The indirect, metaphorical, and symbolic language of story and parable seems to be Jesus' preferred way of teaching spiritual truth. Clearly, Jesus frequently spoke in metaphor, simile, story, and symbol (which don't lend themselves to dogmatic theology) and I fear we miss many of his major messages when we don't read them as such. We are the poorer for it when we do not imitate Jesus' approach. To use the text as Jesus did is to allow it to transform you, to change you, to grow you spiritually.



**Spiritual Practice: “Peace, Be Still”**

Read Mark 4:35-41. Place yourself in the boat with the disciples, becoming one of them as you read. Look at the picture icon of *Storm on the Sea.* This icon illustrates the peaceful space in Jesus. Icons are “prayer helps” that have been used in the church for centuries. They are not meant to be realistic portraits but to point to the spiritual realities they portray. In this one the two disciples in the boat with Jesus represent our two basic responses to the storms of life: flight (John) and fight (Peter). Jesus offers a third response: rest in God. Ponder the icon carefully and ask:

* What emotions or attitudes do you sense the posture and gesture of each figure is conveying? Peter (standing up), John (sitting down), Jesus (sleeping)?
* What are the “winds and waves” that are pressing you? Life, Family, Ministry/Work
* What are your “fight” responses? Worry, Fear, Anger, Contempt, Control
* What are your “flight” responses? Depression, Giving Up, Shutting Down, Self-Medicating, Withdrawing, Addictions

Note that the wind is whipping Peter’s coat to form what looks like wings. And that both Peter and John have halos. In his flight into despair, John isn’t directly looking at Jesus, but he is still glancing at his master out of the corner of his eye.

The icon suggests that the world of peace is possible – that we can live in the Jesus end of the boat, in the peace, trust and confidence of God’s care, even as we face death.

Where would you have Jesus speak, “Peace be still” into your life?

**Spiritual Practice: Reading The Book Of Nature**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

All creation reveals God, so there is no greater location to encounter God than in nature. The following spiritual practice is “Reading the Book of Nature” using the ancient prayer process of *Lectio Divina*. The natural world has a variety of ecosystems, each a unique creation of God worthy of meditating upon. So, regardless of where you live, there are many places to choose from to practice *Lectio Divina* in nature.

The Bible and the life and words of Jesus are the full manifestation of the truth of God, but nature has much to reveal to us about God as well. Paul in Romans 1:20 makes it clear that God reveals himself in nature, and therefore, men are without excuse. The creation account in Genesis also makes it clear that nature is a manifestation and witness of God’s truth in the world. In fact, even God in observing His creation admires it. All of creation then is worthy of our attention, admiration, joy, and delight. This is further verified through a careful reading of Holy Scripture which reveals that many of the most well known and loved stories of the Bible occur outdoors. And, that most of Jesus’ parables were set in nature and that Jesus’ favorite places to commune with God were on seashores, mountain tops, and gardens. Similarly, God followers throughout the centuries have read, delighted, and meditated on Holy Scripture, but many have also discovered that the book of nature can be read in a like manner.

**Step 1. *Lectio* (reading)**

When you come to creation, you immediately recognize that the natural world does not observe the same pace and rhythm as the hurried and harried modern world does. This is especially realized when you experience nature in a remote or rural location. Begin by being attentive to the natural order around you and its rhythms. Being attentive may simply mean observing the vegetation or animal life of the area and being aware of their intricacies.

In this step of *Lectio Divina* you typically read and mull over a specific passage of Scripture until it sinks deep into your heart. The same can be done in reading nature by focusing on a specific rock, bush, tree, insect, or animal that catches your eye. Focusing in on one specific aspect of the natural setting around you gently draws you into God’s presence and creates space where God can speak and act. You may find it helpful to use a journal to write down and organize your observations.

**Step 2. *Meditatio* (meditation/reflection)**

In this step ponder what you have seen, felt and heard, being attentive to what it means. Jesus uses nature as a metaphor in many of his parables. Using a metaphorical lens to reflect upon the natural object you have chosen is helpful to discerning the possibilities of what God might want to say to you.

**Step 3. *Oratio* (response)**

In this step try to pray spontaneously in response to what you have seen, heard, and felt. Allow yourself to dialogue with God, thanking and praising Him, lifting up your observations allowing Him to touch you and change you by His word.

**Step 4. *Contemplatio* (contemplation/rest)**

This final step is characterized by simply loving and focusing on God and His attributes. In Contemplatio you rest in God’s presence, assured of His hearing and responding to your needs and confessions.

You may wish to close by reading this quote from Wendell Berry: “The Bible leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.”

**Spiritual Reading As A Spiritual Practice?**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

*Spiritual reading is reading with an inner attentiveness to the movement of God’s Spirit in our outer and inner lives. With that attentiveness, we will allow God to read us and to explain to us what we are truly about—Henri Nouwen*

Guido of Arezzo, a Benedictine monk in 11th Century Italy, defines spiritual reading as “a sustained receptivity to a beauty not yet realized.” James Finley, a former monk and now a contemplative practitioner and clinical psychologist, says that “spiritual reading creates an interior stance that lowers our resistance to spiritual awakening.” Finley further says, that on an experiential level, spiritual reading is taking a biblical text and allowing it to initiate an interior dialogue between you and God that leads you to a deepening realization of God’s infinite love. What exactly might this look like? Here is how I like to approach spiritual reading as Finley describes it.

**A Spiritual Reading Exercise**

For me, spiritual reading requires that I first get in a proper posture, mentally and physically. This usually means a place of solitude, a comfortable chair, and soft light. Stilling my monkey mind may require some breathing exercises or reciting the Lord’s Prayer or the Jesus Prayer several times.

I then select a biblical text. I’ve found that the Psalms and Jesus’ Parables best facilitate a dialogue with God. I slowly read the text to myself, then out loud, several times. Sometimes even in different translations to see which one resonates the most with me in the moment. I find, that if I place myself into the text, God will use the text to initiate an inner conversation and that He will wait for my response.

Here is how it might work with the Story of the Prodigal Son. I imagine the son walking down the road towards his father’s house rehearsing his lines on why he should be allowed back into the house and hoping his father would be gracious. I imagine the father’s loving, forgiving, and accepting response, even before the son has a chance to deliver his rehearsed speech. This passage touches on my own brokenness. I say to God that I want this experience, but I can’t get past what I did, or what others did to me. I say God, help me out here. I hear God saying that His response to my brokenness is unconditional love, forgiveness, and healing. I find that a prayer usually arises as the dialogue continues.

I might make some notes from this conversation in the margin of my Bible. I pick out one word or phrase from the text or my notes that spoke to me, and I write it on a piece of paper and fold it several times. I put it into my right pants pocket, because I reach into that pocket several times a day for my keys. Each time I feel that piece of paper I am reminded to reflect further on that word, phrase, or passage. Or, I might place it in my left shirt pocket, next to my heart. Then in the business of the day when I get disgruntled or annoyed, I place my hand on my pocket. I ask myself, “does this event or person really have authority over me, and does my slippage really diminish God’s love from me?” The calming effect is palpable.

It is amazing what this practice will do if you repeat it every day. You will find that the habitual practice of spiritual reading becomes its own reward.

**The Ancient/New Spiritual Practice of Centering Prayer**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

Centering Prayer is a simple form of Christian meditation rooted in the spiritual practices of early desert monastics and mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. The contemporary Centering Prayer movement has been popularized by the writings of Trappist monks Thomas Keating, William Menninger, and Basil Pennington.

Father Thomas Keating emphasizes the source of centering payer, as in all methods of contemplative prayer, is the indwelling Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is based on the wisdom of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:6): “If you want to pray, enter your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” It is a method of silent prayer in which we experience God’s immanent presence within us. Centering prayer is grounded in relationship with God, through Christ, and is a practice to nurture that relationship. It is a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Him.

Centering Prayer is *apophatic* prayer — from the Greek word meaning “without words” or “away from words.” This kind of spiritual practice stresses the mystical and hiddenness of God: “Truly you are a God who hides yourself,” as Isaiah put it (45:15). Apophatic prayer is the prayer that recognizes that no words or images are ever adequate to understand or comprehend God; that ultimately human language fails before God’s divine mystery and majesty. Therefore, silence becomes a reliable medium for prayer. As the medieval Jewish writer Rashi put it, “Silence is God’s most eloquent praise, since elaboration must leave glaring omissions.”

**To Practice Centering Prayer, Follow These Steps**

Centering prayer emphasizes resting silently in the presence of God, placing our attention on a single “prayer word” so that our hearts may wordlessly rest in God’s love. It represents a long tradition of Christian teachers who emphasize silence, restful watchfulness, and the recitation of a single word, verse, or phrase as a focal point of awareness — which allows the real work of prayer to take place, in the heart.

The first step in Centering Prayer is to enter your inner room, which is symbolized by the heart in most traditions; that is, your innermost self beyond thinking. Sit in an upright, attentive posture in a way that allows for a straight spine and open heart. Place your hands in your lap.

Second, “close the door” and “close your eyes,” symbolizing your intention of letting go of all thoughts, preoccupations, and plans during this time. As soon as you are overtaken by thoughts, which is inevitable in the beginning, return to your original intention to let go of all thinking. Do this in a very simple and gentle way, like visualizing a sacred symbol, such as a cross, or saying a spiritual word, like one of the fruits of the spirit or an attribute of God.

Finally, you pray in secret to the Father who speaks to you beyond words and who invites you to ever deeper silence. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes. It is recommended to pray in this fashion for a minimum of fifteen minutes. Start out slowly with initial prayer periods of five to ten minutes, then work up to the desired length of time.

A wise person once said, “Pray as you can, not as you can’t.” Don’t make the mistake of thinking spoken or unspoken prayer is “higher” or “better” than the other. Think of them rather as different paths leading up the same mountain. The goal is to get to the summit, no matter what route we take.

**The Cross Prayer As A Spiritual Practice**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

In these days of world-wide suffering and uncertainty, consider gazing upon the cross of Jesus Christ and letting its depth of meaning and symbolism evoke questions to ponder, pray, and reflect upon.

**The Symbolism of the Cross**

From early Christians to today, the cross has symbolized the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and His sufferings and subsequent death and resurrection. Over the centuries the cross has become the most important Christian holy symbol. The two beams of the cross are representative of the dimensions of God’s redemptive work. The vertical beam symbolizes the broken connection people have with their creator. The horizontal beam represents the human condition of broken relationships with others. The axis is where Christ’s redemptive work took place, restoring our connection with God and others. Let the vertical beams of the cross symbolize your relationship with God, the horizontal beam your relationship with others, and the axis your relationship with Jesus.

* Are any of those relationships broken? With God? With family? With friends?
* How might God be calling you to restore them? Let God use your honesty to reveal how He wants you to respond.

Greek and Eastern cultures depict the cross with equal length beams, balancing the left with the right, top with the bottom. Imagine the axis or fulcrum place represents Christ, holiness, wholeness, and balance. Western civilization depicts the cross with the horizontal cross beam shorter than the vertical cross beam. Let this reflect the imbalance of our culture and our lives.

* Where are you out of balance, out of alinement with God’s purpose and plans?
* How is he asking you to restore that balance?

**The Cross Prayer**

The Cross Prayer is a prayer based upon the wounds of Jesus. As you gaze upon the crucifix, let the meaning of each wound provoke a prayer.

**Head** –*Authority*. The wounds on Jesus head represent His authority. Proclaim Christ as the head over all.

**Side** –*Compassion and Wisdom*. The wound in His side represents His heart of compassion and wisdom. Ask Jesus for His heart for each situation and for His wisdom on how to live and pray.

**Left Hand** –*Provision*. The wound on Jesus’ left hand represents His provision. Ask Jesus for His blessing and provision.

**Right Hand** –*Resistance*. The wound on Jesus’ right hand represents His resistance to evil. Ask Jesus for help in resisting evil in all of its forms.

**Feet** –*Victory*. The wounds on Jesus’ feet represent His victory over evil and death. Proclaim the victory of Christ and that evil and death are crushed under His feet

**The Examining Prayer As A Spiritual Practice**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

What is an examining prayer? Typically, it involves reflection on and evaluation of one’s thoughts, activities, and conduct. The Jesuits refer to such prayer as an “examen” or an “examen of conscience” that is based on a spiritual practice developed by St. Ignatius in the 16th Century. Many forms of “The Examine” have been developed over the years but the “Ignatian Examine” is perhaps the most well-known. In his practice St. Ignatius invites us to see and find God in all things. Every moment of the day is an opportunity for a Divine encounter. It involves prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God’s presence and to discern his direction for us. That’s why the Examen is such a powerful prayer. In it, you’re invited to look for and encounter God’s presence in the routine of your everyday life. The Examen is a flexible prayer, too, but is most effective when practiced daily.

**A Five Step Prayer of Examen**

**1. Become aware of God’s presence.** Place yourself in God’s presence. Look back on the events of the day in his presence. The day may seem a blur, a jumble, a muddle. Ask God to bring clarity and understanding.

**2. Review the day with gratitude.** Walk through your day and pray for God’s grace to understand how he is moving in your life. Note the joys and delights of the day. Focus on the day’s gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things—God is in the details.

**3. Pay attention to your emotions.** One of St. Ignatius’s great insights was that we detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. Reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day. Boredom? Elation? Resentment? Compassion? Hurt? Anger? Fear? Confidence? What is God saying through these feelings? Did these moments move you closer to God or farther away?

**4. Choose one feature of the day and pray about it.** Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve an experience, or a feeling or emotion that is positive or negative, clear or muddled, known or unknown. It may be a significant encounter with another person or a vivid moment from your work. God may even show you some ways that you fell short. Whatever he leads you to focus on, look at it thoroughly. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart—whether intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

**5. Look toward tomorrow.** Ask God to give you light, strength, and hope for tomorrow’s challenges and opportunities. Pay attention to the feelings that surface as you survey what’s coming up. Are you doubtful? Cheerful? Apprehensive? Full of anticipation? Allow these feelings to turn into prayer. Seek God’s guidance. Ask him for help and understanding. Pray for wisdom and direction.

**Some Things To Keep In Mind**

Remember, the *examen*is flexible within the bounds of its five points.  You may discover that your progress through the five steps is not predictable.  Sometimes the order will vary and at other times you may not progress beyond the first point or two.

Also remember that the *examen*is not all there is to prayer.  Although the *examen* is a bringing of one’s daily life into God’s presence it is not necessarily, for example, intercessory prayer for others.

Finally, keep in mind the purpose of this spiritual practice. John Govan writes that the *examen* is “a concrete way of growing into a vision which integrates everything that happens in one’s life so that God is always seen as present and nothing is necessarily an obstacle to spiritual growth.  If practiced faithfully, the Examen can lead to a deep and personal relationship with the Lord so that everything is understood in terms of that relationship.  This type of vision is needed if spiritual and human growth are to be seen as interdependent.”

**The Jesus Prayer As A Spiritual Practice**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

Have you heard the story of the Russian Pilgrim and the **Jesus Prayer** told in the “**Way of the Pilgrim?”** It’s a heart-warming and unforgettable story of how God brought healing and transformation to a lonely, depressed man. His amazing story begins this way:

One day in the early 1800’s a poor young man went to a church in Russia, desperate for God. He had lost the use of his arm in a tragic accident. Then he was orphaned at an early age. Then his brother stole his inheritance. Then his wife died after just a few short years of marriage.

On this day as he went to church he was homeless and alone in the world. In short, he was depressed. In church he heard a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5:17: “Pray without ceasing.” He was drawn to such a life, but couldn’t conceive of how even to begin. How could anyone pray continuously? He decided to go on a journey and find someone who could teach him how to pray. So, he walked the countryside of Russia asking everyone he met if they knew how to pray without ceasing. But, no one did. Still, he pressed on. He knew that God had spoken to his heart.

Finally, the pilgrim came upon a monk who taught him the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This prayer was developed by the Desert Fathers of the 3rd and 4th Centuries from the often-repeated prayer of the Psalms, “Lord, have mercy on me.” This phrase is also found in the Gospels, such as, the prayer of the tax collector in Luke 18:13, and the prayer of the blind beggar in Luke 18:38-39. The monk instructs the pilgrim to pray, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God” as he inhales, and to imagine inhaling in the mystery of oneness with God revealed in Christ. He is told to allow the words to descend from the mouth to the throat and to the heart. And, then to exhale out the words “have mercy on me, a sinner” and to imagine exhaling out all that separates oneself from the realization of the oneness with God revealed in Christ. The pilgrim is instructed to recite the prayer continuously through the day.

The pilgrim walked about the countryside with the Jesus Prayer continually on his lips. Literally thousands of times a day he murmured the Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Again and again, slowly and meditatively inhaling and exhaling the words, he prayed the Jesus Prayer. Sometimes stressing a different word, at other times shortening it by inhaling “Lord Jesus” and exhaling “have mercy on me.” Or, briefer still, “Jesus” and “mercy.” Always confessing his sinfulness and crying out with longing for God. Always worshiping Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Over time the prayer became a habit of the heart for the pilgrim. At one critical point in his journey the pilgrim said that the prayer woke him up, and at that moment he realized he was no longer his impoverished self that first began the quest. The prayer had healed his wounds and caused him to become a loving person, one who realized that he loved everyone he met along the road. The prayer had transformed the pilgrim from a desperate and depressed man to one full of joy and love. It had given meaning to his life and the prayer flowed through him to bless and heal others.

It is said that the anonymous pilgrim learned to pray the Jesus Prayer over 3,000 times a day! I find that hard to imagine, but I have found it helpful to take an extended time of silence in the day or night to pray the Jesus Prayer dozens of times, slowly inhaling and exhaling the words. I found that by continuously inhaling and exhaling the Jesus Prayer, it soon became as natural as breathing. Surprisingly, I found myself praying the prayer even when I had not consciously intended to. And, most importantly, it became a way of practicing God’s presence and experiencing the peace and love of Christ throughout the day and night. Why not give it a try? It just might be something you’ll want to add to your spiritual practice tool box.

**The Spiritual Practice Of Prompted Prayers**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

Like most people of faith, over the years I have practiced various forms of prayer and have settled in on a few that are the most meaningful. One of those I call “prompted prayers.” I refer to them as prompted prayers because they are prayers that are brought to mind by some cue, usually something visual. For centuries, those of the Catholic faith have used painted icons and biblical images to prompt their prayers. A more contemporary expression is to let a visual cue from everyday life, such as a person, place, or thing, to stimulate your prayers. My favorite approach is to surround my home and office with various objects, that when gazed upon, bring to mind a specific prayer.

**How Prompted Praying Works**

In the winter, my wife and I gather by the kitchen fireplace early each morning before engaging in the day’s activities. After the fire is good and warm, I start my gaze with the fire itself and then move my focus back and forth around my field of view. Here is what I see and how it prompts my specific prayers.

1. The **flames of the fire**, prompts me to pray for the presence and indwelling of the Holy Spirit.
2. A **bowl of fruit**, prompts me to pray for the Fruits of the Spirit in my life.
3. A hand carved **wood raven** hanging from the ceiling, prompts me to pray that, like all animals, I would be true to my innate gifts and calling and be the very best version of myself.
4. A metal **“Love” sign** stuck in a potted plant, prompts me to pray for the Law of Love to be manifest in my life.
5. Several **carved stone animals** on our mantel, prompts me to pray for what the animal symbolizes: the buffalo, for abundance, the bear, for protection, and the owl, for wisdom.
6. A **crown of thorns** hanging by a nail on our fireplace, prompts me to remember Christ’s response to Roman cruelty and suffering…..unconditional love, forgiveness, humility, non-defensiveness, and non-violence, and to pray for those attributes in my own life.
7. A vintage carved wood **Native American dancer** mounted on a piece of petrified wood, prompts me to reflect on the Native American belief that God is literally in everything and that is to be celebrated, and to pray that I would have the eyes to see and celebrate God in all things.
8. A **salt lamp** sitting next to the fireplace, prompts me to pray that I would be salt and light, especially “to the least of these.”
9. A large **oxen yoke** hanging over the den entry, prompts me to pray that I would lay all of my burdens and worries on Jesus.
10. A clay **Native American Kashare, or clown**, prompts me to pray that I wouldn’t take myself too seriously, and that I would bring joy to someone’s life today.
11. A series of paintings on our den wall that prominently feature **churches** in small New Mexican communities, prompts me to pray for the churches I have served and the church universal.
12. Various **crosses and crucifixes** hanging in our entryway, prompts me to be thankful for Jesus’ life, death, and transforming resurrection, to pray for forgiveness.
13. A sculpture of a **man and woman embracing**, prompts me to pray for my wife, her needs, and our relationship.
14. A vintage Spanish wood carved **statue of Saint Francis**, the patron saint of hearing, prompts me to pray for God’s hand of healing on myself, friends and loved-ones.
15. An antique Guatemalan **prayer alter** with nine votive candles, prompts me to pray for nine people that God brings to my mind and heart in the moment.

The idea of prompted praying is simply to allow yourself to gaze on your surroundings and see how God prompts your mind and heart to pray. Like me, you may want to intentionally collect and place pictures, items, and objects around you that bring to mind something or someone that you want to consistently keep before God. I invite you to add this practice to your spiritual disciplines and see if it draws you into a more consistent, more thorough, more meaningful, and deeper form of prayer.

**Train Yourself To Be Godly With The Daily Office**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

“……train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” (1 Timothy 4:7-8)

Clearly, our emphasis on a daily morning quiet time isn’t resulting in the transformation we would hope for. An alternative is the Daily Office, an ancient spiritual discipline, that when practiced until it becomes habit, can cause us to pay attention to God throughout the day and nurture our relationship with him.

**The Daily Office History**

The word *office* comes from the Latin word *opus,* translated in English as “work.” For the early church, the Daily Office signified the “work of God,” demonstrated through fixed hours of prayer to which nothing was to interfere. In fact, along with the Lord’s Supper, fixed hour prayer is considered the oldest practice of Christian spirituality.

The Daily Office is patterned after the practices of early devout people of faith. We know that King David practiced set times of prayer seven times a day (Psalm 119:164). Daniel prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10). After Jesus’ resurrection, his disciples continued to pray at fixed hours of the day (Acts 3:1; 10:2-23). In his *Rule*, Benedict formalized the Offices for monks and laymen around eight Daily Offices. All of these people realized that stopping throughout the day to “be” with God, even if it meant to stop “doing for” God, was the key to experiencing God’s continual presence. The Daily Office reorients the one who practices it, momentarily turning one’s focus from the experiences and responsibilities of daily life, to the Creator of life.

**Elements of the Daily Office**

Over the centuries various forms of the Daily Office have evolved, differing for monks, clergy, and laity and even by denomination. Typical elements of the Daily Office include:

* Silence, Stillness, Contemplation
* Scripture Reading
* Devotional Reading
* Reflection, Meditation
* Prayer

Observing the Daily Office obviously takes a great deal of discipline, whether practiced twice or eight times a day. In the end, each of us must look realistically at our lives and determine how the Daily Office might fit into our spiritual practices. Fortunately, in recent years a number of resources have been published that provide a structure for the novice to begin practicing the Daily Office.

On the concise end, Peter Scazzero provides a twice a day format in his book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality…..A 40 Day Journey with the Daily Office.* The most expansive resource is the three-volume *Divine Hours* by Phyllis Tickle. She has compiled the most well-known resources on the Daily Office, updated the archaic language, and put them into practical and usable form. In the forward Phyllis Tickle writes: “Asking me why I keep the Daily Office is like asking me why I go to church. One, granted, is a place of bricks and mortar, but the other is a chapel of the heart, as powerful a place, albeit one of the spirit. The Daily Office opens to me four times a day a call to remember who owns my time. All that means really is that four times a day the watchmaker and I have conversation about the clock and my place as a nanosecond in it.”

**Spiritual Practice - A Personal Virtue Vision**

**By Jim Baker, SacredStructures.org**

A “Personal Virtue Vision” develops an individualized picture of transformation in specific areas of life, and requires careful training plans to accomplish. For example, I must first envision what virtue would look like in particular areas of my life:

* *Money:* If I were out of control in spending and full of greed, what would it be like to be content with my possessions and free to be generous with what I have?
* *Anger or Control:* If I were angry and controlling, what would it look like to be able to put away anger quickly and trust God for outcomes rather than manipulate circumstances or people to accomplish my perception of what is best?
* *Fear or Worry:* If I were living in fear or worried about matters, what would it be like to be able to trust God’s provision and be peaceful, no matter the circumstances?

**Step One:** Read and prayerfully reflect on this passage from the Message Bible: II Peter 1:3-11. Begin to pray about an area of life where God is leading you to establish a virtue vision.

**\**Good character*** – the areas of life you envision God’s goodness to touch, the areas you decide to establish a virtue vision in to be more like Christ in your life.

**\**Spiritual understanding*** – scriptures & other knowledge you can learn about that area.

**\**Alert discipline*** – the practices & habits you train with to bring life change.

**\**Passionate patience*** – the continued attempts at obedience that in this area of life, that will be hard at first, but eventually as you endure, will supernaturally become a natural part of a new you in your behaviors and attitudes.

**\**Reverent wonder*** – this will require all your effort to abandon yourself to God’s power and grace to change you in that area.

**\**Warm friendliness*** – evidence of real change is that you are a more loving person to others due to change in that area.

**\**Generous love*** – you are more loving to others in this area where you have changed even when some are indifferent to, offended by or even hostile to you due to the change in you.

**Step Two:** Prayerfully read the passages listed below. Use these scriptures to help you identify any recurring thought, feeling, attitude, behavior, habit or sin to be transformed. As you read make a note of anything that seems like it could be an area you might consider.

* Read a chapter in Proverbs {one or two chapters from chapters 10-28} and notice if an attitude, behavior or character trait, negative or positive, grabs your attention, complaining, listening, talking less, jealousy/envy, etc.
* Read the Love chapter, I Corinthians 13, kindness, thinking only the best of another, not reviling back, etc.
* Read Romans chapters 12-14, Ephesians chapters 4-6 or Colossians chapters 3-4 thinking the best of everyone, ingratitude, judgmental, etc.
* Read the Sermon on the Mount chapters 5-7 and ponder if contempt, anger, half-truths/dishonesty, etc. characterize your life.

**Step Three:** Talk to a couple of your most trusted friends or family members and have them pray for you as you do this exercise. If you feel comfortable, ask them what they have any wisdom or nudging from God on your behalf to help you choose your virtue vision areas.

**Step Four:** What virtues do you feel drawn to by God in healthy conviction so that you are both sufficiently challenged and also looking forward to seeing transformed?

**Step Five:** Develop an actual plan of spiritual practices, disciplines and training exercises to pursue in each specific area you wish to see transformed.