

Welcome

After my mom remarried, she came up with a really strange tradition for our blended family to do. We prayed before we shared a meal together.

Praying before we eat isn't unusual - a lot of us do that. And before she remarried, my siblings and I took turns praying for our food. My stepdad is Catholic, so he has a simple prayer he offers before each meal: "Bless us, oh Lord, for these - thy gifts - which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Through Christ our Lord. Amen."

But my mom decided that now that we were a new family, we needed a new ritual. So we sing the Doxology before we eat together. Unless you grew up Methodist (like my mom), you may not know that song off hand. It goes

— sing *Doxology* —

In Methodist churches, you sing it together every week, so it was very familiar to her. And now we all sing it together whenever we share a meal together (Amanda had to learn it when she married into the family).

It's... a pretty weird way to pray for a meal.

But prayer is a strange practice in general, isn't it?

A lot of us were taught prayers as kids - "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." (Whoa that gets dark SO FAST!) or "God is great, God is good. Let us thank him for our food."

As we get older, those prayers seem a little simple, but the next steps can be tough. Maybe we learned an acronym like ACTS - Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication (nothing like a bunch of \$10 words to make prayer less intimidating, right?!). Or we hung out with people who love to pray but it's a little awkward...

"Lord Jesus, we just come to you now lord, and we just want to lift up your name lord as we come together to just praise your holy name lord Jesus..." Like... they talk for quite a while without saying a whole lot.

Most of us think of prayer as asking God for things. And while that's *part* of what prayer is, when we reduce prayer to just asking for stuff, we miss the purpose and nature of prayer.

So today we're going to explore what prayer is for - how we can use prayer to create a daily rhythm that helps us remain in communion with God throughout our days - not just in crisis or when we want something.

Message

For the month of August, we're in a series called How to Get Your Groove Back. The most common experience we've had throughout the pandemic is a loss of rhythms, the structures, patterns and habits that help us navigate our lives. We made jokes about how the whole lockdown felt like a timeless void where everything was the same. Then we'd all laugh nervously and look to the side because of course it wasn't *really* a joke. We lost so many of the routines and structures that we took for granted. We lost the rhythms of life that helped us make sense of our world.

Everything began opening back up right as we entered into summer - which is another one of those times our rhythms become more fluid. Kids are out of school, we take trips. But now we're looking toward the new normal. Schools are returning to session. Summer is coming to an end.

So we want to ask over the next month how we get back into rhythms of faith. What are the practices that order our lives and lead us to life and flourishing?

We began last week by acknowledging that we were created to live in rhythms - daily, weekly, monthly. So today, I want to start at that first place many of us have felt lost - the loss of daily rhythms. After everything shut down last spring, this was the biggest complaint I heard from everyone - that our daily rhythms were disrupted, destroyed. And they're the rhythms we've struggled most to reclaim even as everything has reopened.

One of the Scriptures we explored last week was the opening song in the book of Psalms. In its reflection on a person who is deeply rooted and unshakeable, a person whose life is a blessing for those around them, it says this:

Oh, the joys of those who do not
follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners,
or join in with mockers.

But they delight in the law of the Lord,
meditating on it day and night.
They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season.

Their leaves never wither,
and they prosper in all they do. -- Psalm 1:1-3 (NLT)

They meditate on the 'law of the LORD' - another way of saying they spend their time resting in and contemplating God's way for us to live. And they do it "night and day" - a phrase that means 'all the time' but also points us back to the creation story, where God created night and day as that very first rhythm in creation:

Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day” and the darkness “night.”

And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day. -- Genesis 1:3–5 (NLT)

Night and day. A pretty basic rhythm that we’re super disconnected from. Part of that is because we follow the Roman day. In a world before clocks, the easiest time to calculate was Noon - it’s when nothing has a shadow. The Romans called that *meridian*. So then they divided the day into pre-noon, or Ante Meridian and post-noon, or Post-Meridian. AM and PM. And then the opposite of Noon was midnight. So... they started their day at midnight. Which is pretty strange, honestly.

For God’s people, though, the day begins with... evening. Sundown marks the beginning of the day.

And for most of human history (until the invention of electric lights), once the sun went down, we pretty much had to stop working.

[VWitch] One of my favorite horror films is The VVitch, in part because there’s hardly any actual monster or witches. It’s mostly implication. The film is set in 17th century New England and focuses on a Puritan family who lives isolated in the woods. One of the most striking images was this one, where they’re all eating dinner.

Look how dark it is. Because the sun is down. All you can do is eat by candlelight and go to bed.

For a long time - most of human history - we were more or less bound to the rhythm of sunlight. It’s only been in the last *two hundred years* that major cities had gas lights, to say nothing of homes (100 years ago, less than half of US homes had electricity!).

Today, we live in a world of alarm clocks and third shifts. A world of emails on our phones and burning the midnight oil. Technology has freed us from our binding to daylight. In the process, though, it’s also created the capacity to bind us to work. What once had to end at sunset now can continue well into the night.

Our increasing distance from the natural world makes it easier for us to forget that Jesus is present with us in our daily lives. We end up relegating faith to a weekend thing, something occasional, while the majority of our time is... godless.

So prayer is a way for us to reclaim the daily rhythm of faith. And I know that sounds strange - mainly because we think of prayer as asking for things. And it feels a little strange to just ask for things over and over and over.

But as the Psalm reminds us, prayer and meditation are exercises that help us to be aware that Jesus is present with us throughout our days.

A number of Christian traditions act this out by having morning, noon and evening prayers - this is where our traditions of praying before meals and before bed come from.

It doesn't make a lot of sense to keep asking for things over and over, three times a day. But again, that's not the main purpose of prayer. It's so that throughout our day, we pause and remember that God is with us and we want to walk with God through our days.

So when we pray, what *should* we do? Well fortunately, Jesus has some direction for us.

Turn with us to [Matthew 6](#).

This is the famous Lord's Prayer, which many of you likely have memorized to some degree or another. I know it by heart in King James English because, just like the Doxology, the Methodist churches I grew up in said it every week. I want to read for you where Jesus gives us the prayer and point out a couple of things:

“When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

“When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! Pray like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
may your name be kept holy.
May your Kingdom come soon.
May your will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.
Give us today the food we need,
and forgive us our sins,
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
And don't let us yield to temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.” -- Matthew 6:5–13 (NLT)

Jesus encourages us not to make a big deal out of our prayers - he points at the super religious people who make a big show out of praying. He says if you're praying to impress people, then congrats... you impressed them and that's all your prayer is ever going to do.

But prayer that matters, prayer that's effective, is the prayer you do just for you and is between you and God.

That's a really good reminder.

The other group he warns us against praying like is people who babble on and on. This is the sort of ritualistic prayer that, ironically, the Lord's Prayer has often become. Jesus is clear here: prayer is not a magic spell. It's not something you repeat well enough times and then POOF you get what you want.

Prayer should be something we express in our own language. That's why I think the fact that so many of us knows the Lord's Prayer in King James is pretty silly.

Our Father, which Art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. I mean... I'll be honest. I went to a LOT of Bible schooling and I am not totally sure what "hallowed be thy name" means. When I pray, "hallowed be thy name," what am I actually asking? What am I praying for??

A few years ago, I decided to do a little experiment and try to imagine Jesus teaching us the Lord's Prayer today. How might he pray if he were praying in our everyday English?

Here's what I came up with:

Our father, who created and rules the universe,
show us your perfect love so that we may imitate you.
Shape the world so everything runs the way you want it to – just like heaven does.
Keep us healthy with three square meals today
And forgive the wrongs we've done the same way we forgive the people who've wronged us.
Keep us safe – from ourselves and from the evils in the world.

Can you feel what that prayer is doing? Inviting us to remember God is always with us, and helping us to see where the world isn't the way God wants it to be? This prayer creates space for us to be with God and then join God in God's work in the world.

As we move into a time of response, I want to invite you to consider your daily rhythms. Do you order your day with God? Or do you allow something else - work, your family, other habits or hobbies - order your day?

What could happen if, just for this week, you made it a point to begin and end your day with Jesus?

How might God be working and present in your life? And what could happen if you allow yourself to wake up to God's presence?

Communion + Examen

The table helps us be present to Jesus.

Our father, who created and rules the universe,
show us your perfect love so that we may imitate you.

Shape the world so everything runs the way you want it to – just like heaven does.

Keep us healthy with three square meals today

And forgive the wrongs we've done the same way we forgive the people who've wronged us.

Keep us safe – from ourselves and from the evils in the world.

Assignment + Blessing

Daily Examen!