

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*

Week 6—Discover the Rhythms of the Daily Office and Sabbath:

Key Principle: Developing a relationship with God takes time and intention, which requires a purposeful plan. Step one is creating space and following a pattern and rhythm that will help develop this vital relationship.

Many of us are eager to develop our relationship with God. The problem, however, is that we can't seem to stop long enough to be with Him. And if we aren't busy, we feel guilty that we are wasting time and not being productive. It is like being addicted—not to drugs or alcohol—but to tasks, work, and doing.

But God is offering us a way to deeply root our lives in Him. This can be found in two ancient disciplines going back thousands of years—the Daily Office and Sabbath. When placed inside present-day Christianity, the Daily Office and Sabbath are groundbreaking, countercultural acts that go against the grain of our fast-paced Western culture.

Stopping for the Daily Office and Sabbath is not meant to add another “to-do” to our already busy schedules. It is the resetting of our entire lives toward a new destination—God Himself. These practices enable us to stay attuned to God's presence throughout our days and weeks.

The Daily Office:

The term *Daily Office* (also called *fixed-hour prayer*, *Divine Office*, or *liturgy of the hours*) differs from what we label today as *quiet time* or *devotions*. When I listen carefully to most people describe their devotional life, the emphasis tends to be on “getting filled up for the day” or “interceding for the needs around me.” The root of the Daily Office is not so much a turning to God to get something but to be *with* Someone. The word *Office* comes from the Latin word *opus*, or “work.” For the early church, the Daily Office was always the “work of God.” Nothing was to interfere with that priority. It was “an act of offering...by the creature to the Creator...prayers of praise offered as a sacrifice of thanksgiving and faith to God and as sweet-smelling incense...before the throne of God.”

You choose the length of time for your Offices. The key, remember, is regular remembrance of God, not length. Your pausing to be with God can last anywhere from two minutes to twenty minutes to forty-five minutes. It is up to you.

You also choose the content of your Offices...Yet four elements, I believe, need to be found in any Office, regardless of what approach you ultimately choose. The Office can be done together or alone.

1. Stopping

This is the essence of a Daily Office. What is more important than the number of offices each day is that our time with God be unhurried so that what we read or pray has time to sink deeply into our spirits. We stop our activity and pause to be with the living God. Central to the challenge of stopping at midday, for example, is to trust that God is on the throne. He rules. I don't. At each Office I give up control and trust God to run his world without me.

2. Centering

Scripture commands us: “Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7) and “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). We move into God’s presence and rest there. That alone is no small feat. For this reason I often spend five minutes centering down so I can let go of my tensions, distractions, and sensations and begin resting in the love of God. I follow James Finley’s guidelines for these times:

- Be attentive and open
- Sit still
- Sit straight
- Breathe slowly, deeply, and naturally
- Close your eyes or lower them to the ground

When you find your mind wandering, let your breathing bring you back. As you breathe in, ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit. As you breathe out, exhale all that is sinful, false, and not of him.

A second tool I use when my mind wanders is to pray the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” If nothing else happens during a Daily Office, it is a call to mindfulness, an invitation to pay attention to what our short, earthly lives are all about.

3. Silence

Dallas Willard called *silence* and *solitude* the two most radical disciplines of the Christian life. Solitude is the practice of being absent from people and things to attend to God. Silence is the practice of quieting every inner and outer voice to attend to God. Henri Nouwen said that “without solitude it is almost impossible to live a spiritual life.”

These are probably the most challenging and least practiced disciplines among Christians today. We live in a world of noise and distractions. Most of us fear silence. Studies say that the average group can only bear fifteen seconds of silence. Most of our church services confirm this.

When God appeared to Elijah after his suicidal depression and flight from Jezebel, he told him to stand and wait for the presence of the Lord to pass by. God did not appear in ways he had in the past. God was not in the wind (as with Job), an earthquake (as at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Ten Commandments), or fire (as in the burning bush with Moses).

God finally revealed himself to Elijah in “a sound of sheer silence,” which is the literal translation of 1 Kings 19:12. The translation often used for this text—“a still small voice” or “gentle whisper”—does not capture the original Hebrew. But what could translators do? How do you *hear* silence?

The silence after the chaos, for Elijah and for us, is full of the presence of God. God did speak to Elijah out of the silence, and he speaks also to us. While it is not the objective of the Office, it is a natural result.

4. Scripture

The psalms are the foundation of almost any Daily Office book you will find available today. They have served as the prayer book of the church through the centuries. Jesus quoted psalms

more than any other book except Isaiah. The prayers of the Psalter cover the entire gamut of our life experience—from anger to rage to trust to praise. A good Daily Office guide will also lead you to Old and New Testament readings that both reflect the church calendar year and a balanced diet of spiritual food. I often conclude each Daily Office by slowly and thoughtfully praying the Lord’s Prayer.

There are many other rich spiritual practices you can integrate into your Daily Office—*lectio divina* (meditation on Scripture), centering prayer, singing along with a worship CD, reading through the Bible in a year, readings from devotional classics, to name a few.

A good rule to follow when dealing with tools and techniques is this: If it helps, do it. If it does not help you, do not do it—including the Daily Office! If reading the psalms helps you, then great. Do it. If reading the psalms has become routine and dead for you, then don’t. Maybe it is time for you to meditate on one phrase, such as “You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me” (Psalm 139:5) and sit in silence. Be attentive in your heart to what God is doing inside of you. Learn from others. Remember: we go through seasons. And most important, let God be your guide.

The purpose of the Daily Office is to remember God and commune with him all through our days. Keep that clearly in mind as you develop structures and habits that fit you. We are constantly tempted to think God will love us more if we pray more, do the Daily Office often, and keep the Sabbath. Remember grace, which reminds us there is nothing we can do or not do that would cause God to love us any more than he does right now.

Sabbath:

The word *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew word that means “to cease, to stop working.” It refers to doing nothing related to work for a twenty-four hour period each week. It refers to this unit of time around which we are to orient our entire lives as “holy,” meaning “separate, a cut above” the other six days (Genesis 2:2–3). Sabbath provides for us now an additional rhythm for an entire reorientation of our lives around the living God. On Sabbaths we imitate God by stopping our work and resting.

Make no mistake about it: keeping the command to Sabbath is both radical and extremely difficult in our everyday lives. It cuts to the core of our spirituality, the core of our convictions, the core of our faith, the core of our lifestyles.

Our culture knows nothing of setting aside a whole day (twenty-four hours) to rest and delight in God... Keeping the Sabbath in Scripture is a commandment—right next to refraining from lying, murdering, and committing adultery. Sabbath is a gift from God we are invited to receive.

The Sabbath calls us to build the doing of nothing into our schedules each week. Nothing measurable is accomplished. By the world’s standards it is inefficient, unproductive, and useless. As one theologian stated, “To fail to see the value of simply being with God and ‘doing nothing’ is to miss the heart of Christianity.”

Sabbath, when lived, is our means as the people of God to bear witness to the way we understand life, its rhythms, its gifts, its meaning, and its ultimate purpose in God. Observing the Sabbath, we affirm: “God is the center and source of our lives. He is the beginning, the middle, and the end of our existence.” We trust God to provide and care for us.

Eugene Peterson points out even though Sabbath has been one of the most abused and distorted practices of the Christian life, we cannot do without it. "Sabbath is not primarily about us or how it benefits us; it is about God and how God forms us...I don't see any way out of it; if we are going to live appropriately in the creation we must keep the Sabbath."

Four principles of Biblical Sabbath are:

- **Stop:** "To stop" is built into the literal meaning of the Hebrew word "sabbath". We have limits. God is on the throne running the world. We are called to let go and trust Him.
- **Rest:** Once we stop, we are called to rest from our work and our "doings." There is nothing to "accomplish" or "achieve".
- **Delight:** We are to slow down so we can enjoy what we have been given.
- **Contemplate:** We seek to see the invisible in the visible—to recognize the hidden ways the miracle of life is all around us in his gifts to us.

- Q. What practices, habits, disciplines do you currently utilize in order to connect with and encounter God? (Describe, in detail, what this entails, what effect it has on you, how you "feel" about it—or your attitude toward it. Include the rhythms/patterns that this takes; i.e. daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal/annual practices.)**
- Q. On a scale of 1 to 10, how busy are you? (1 = not very busy, 10 = very busy.) Where on the scale would you like to be? Is the current schedule and pace of your life by your own choosing or is it somehow "forced" upon you? (Explain).**
- Q. Ultimately, what are you trying to accomplish in life? What are you doing to reach that goal? (In reality, if someone were to observe our life for a week or so, they could fairly accurately surmise what our life's goal/purpose is, or at the very least what's important to us. What would an observer surmise about you?)**
- Q. As you consider the Daily Office and Sabbath (or really any spiritual disciplines), does it feel like an extra burden or task that you "should", "ought", "are expected to" add to your life? Or, does it feel like a joy-filled invitation to something refreshing? (Or something in-between?) Be honest—at this point in our Emotionally Healthy Spirituality study I would hope that honestly sharing how we feel about things is getting easier. Don't worry about how you're "supposed to" feel about this.**
- Q. As you consider the Daily Office and/or keeping the Sabbath, what seems most challenging to you? What seems most inviting and alluring to you?**

* The majority of this document is excerpts from the book “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality” by Peter Scazzero (ISBN 978-0-310-34857-0), and the “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Workbook” by Peter & Geri Scazzero (ISBN 978-0-310-08519-5)