



Fixed Hour Prayer

Seven times a day I praise you because of you righteous laws. Great well-being to the lovers of Your teaching, and no stumbling block to them. Psalm 119: 164

Peter and John were going up to the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon, the established prayer time. Luke 11: 9-12

Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all believers. Ephesians 6:17

What is Fixed Hour Prayer?

Fixed hour prayer is one of the oldest traditions of Christian communal spirituality. The above quoted Psalm inspired the Jewish people to communally cease all activity seven times each day and focus on short prayers together (focusing on important readings to their identity as the people of God). Jesus and the disciples would have grown up praying prewritten prayers at certain (or "fixed") times each day and the early church inherited the tradition. Though we're not sure exactly what hours they would have prayed at, in the 500s St. Benedict created seven fixed times of prayer for monks in his communities which have been the standard hours of prayer ever since. If you're curious the traditional names are: Matins ("of the morning" at dawn), Prime ("first" at 6 AM), Lauds ("praise" at sunrise), Terce ("third" at 9 AM), Sext ("sixth" at noon), None ("ninth" at 3 PM), Vespers ("evening" held at sundown) and Compline (pronounced comp-lin, "complete" before going to sleep). Aside from Monastic communities most people who practice fixed hour prayer do so 3-4 times a day. The most common times and prayers are simply called "Morning prayer," "Mid-day prayer," "Evening Prayer" (or sometimes "Evensong") and/or "Compline." Whether using pre-written prayers or spontaneous prayer most people spend between five and fifteen minutes several times a day with fixed prayer. The goal is to make these times of prayer short, regular, and focused throughout our day.

Why practice fixed hour prayer?

It is one of the simplest and most practical ways to obey Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5: 17) as well as one of the most time tested spiritual practices next to the Lord's Supper. Like all of the rhythms and practices we associate with spiritual growth, fixed hour prayer gives us the opportunity to be slowly changed a few minutes at a time that are spent aside from our usual routines, worries, work, and play for God's sake. We rededicate ourselves a few times a day being reminded that our responsibilities are connected with God since he is always present. It is an alternative cultural practice that reminds us our time is ultimately not ours, but is to be offered to God.

How to practice fixed hour prayer?

Obviously, jumping into adding several new times of prayer each day is not a realistic practice for most of us (nor a particularly desirable one). We should start by looking at our current routines of prayer. When do we tend to pray? How often do we pray? Are we intentional about when and how we pray or do we usually pray as the mood or thought occurs to us? Once we have a good idea of how we do pray, we ask ourselves how we would like to be praying. Do we need to structure our time of prayer differently? What kinds of aids do we tend to use (if any)? When do we set aside time for prayer? Are there other times that might be more helpful or more natural to our current place and stage in life? Do I need to use some of traditional times for these prayers since no time will ever be convenient? The goal is to grow into these regular rhythms of prayer a little at a time. I believe the slow effort to be well worth the work it may start out as being.

Another consideration: will we use a prayer book (or other form of pre-written prayers) or use our own words of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, etc. (Using a traditional prewritten prayer is usually what is meant by another popular form of fixed prayer called the "Daily Office.") Though some people view using pre-written words as prayers to be too formal or stiff, I think we sometimes need to allow other people's writing to express our needs and the longings of our hearts. One advantage of using pre-written prayers is that we will not only rely on our own thought patterns, needs, or emotional state in prayer. Often others people's pre-written prayers will take us in directions of prayer we had not anticipated thinking about or may remind us of aspects of our or others needs we had not thought of. Pre-written prayers can also be useful during times when we are emotionally overwhelmed or confused and simply cannot seem to express ourselves to God. We also will find amazing unity with people of faith from all of history as we struggle through the same joys and sorrows God's people have as we pray the same words they have written for us.

Resources:

Biblical Prayers:

"Lord's Prayer" (Matt. 6: 9-13 and Luke 11: 2-4)

Book of Psalms

Daily Office Prayer Books:

"Divine Hours" by Phyllis Tickle

"A Diary of Private Prayer" by John Baillie

"Common Prayer" by Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

"Celtic Benediction" by J Philip Newell

Apps:

"Daily Prayer"

"Common Prayer"

Questions for Reflection:

-When do I tend to pray?

-Do I prefer certain times? What is important about these times?

-When do I set aside time for prayer?

-How often do I pray?

-How do I remind myself of God's presence throughout the day?

-Are there other times that might be more helpful or more natural?

-Am I intentional about when and how I pray?

(-Or do I usually pray as the mood or thought occurs to me?)

-Do I need to structure my time of prayer differently?

-What kinds of aids do I tend to use (if any)?