



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Sweet Hours of Prayer
(Prayer, pp. 36-42)

Suggested Article:

📖 A Call to Prayer
(Prayer, pp. 66-67)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Sweet Hours of Prayer

Fixed-hour prayer anchors our lives in rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and silence, ensuring that we do not get too far into any day without reorienting ourselves to the presence of God. Praying at least some of the fixed-hours with others can shape our identity as communities of believers.

Prayer: Psalm 55:1, 17, 22

Give ear to my prayer, O God;
do not hide yourself from my supplication.

Evening and morning and at noon

**I utter my complaint and moan,
and he will hear my voice.**

Cast your burden on the Lord,
and he will sustain you;

**he will never permit
the righteous to be moved. Amen.**

Meditation[†]

There is probably no image that expresses so well the intimacy with God in prayer as the image of God's breath. We are like asthmatic people who are cured of their anxiety. The Spirit has taken away our narrowness (the Latin word for anxiety is *angustia* = narrowness) and made freedom, a new life. This new life is the divine life of God himself. Prayer, therefore, is God's breathing in us, by which we become part of the intimacy of God's inner life. So, the paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organize or manipulate God; but without a careful discipline, we cannot receive him either.

Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932-1996)

Reflection

Fixed-hour prayer (also called "the daily office" or "divine hours") is the ancient practice of pausing at regular times each day to pray. Prayer books typically include an invocation, a psalm and other scripture passages, a creed, a collect or other prayer of the Church, a hymn, and a benediction that are selected for the time of day and the season of the Church year.

Ruth Haley Barton writes that her affinity for this form of prayer came as a surprise. "I had been highly suspicious of what those in my evangelical tradition would have called 'rote prayers' – written prayers that we all feared would foster the vain repetitions that Jesus warned about. I was convinced that spontaneous prayers were the only real prayers because they came from the heart," she admits. "But I have discovered that there is another option and that is to allow the words of the great prayers of the Church to engage my heart and to really mean them!"

Barton commends the practice of fixed-hour prayer because:

- ▶ *It provides rich language to approach God.* "The farther along one gets in the spiritual life," she notes, "the harder it is to articulate the longings that roil beneath the surface of our lives, the intimacies of our life with God, the questions and disillusionments that leave us speechless. When our own words fail us, the well-chosen



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words of Scripture or the prayers from the old prayer books help us to express the inexpressible in deeply satisfying ways and open us to encounter with God.”

- ▶ *It is rooted in Jewish tradition and modeled in the early Church.* The psalmist alludes to fixed-hour prayer (Psalm 55:17; cf. 119:164) and Daniel prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10). The book of Acts mentions that Peter and John prayed at certain hours each day (Acts 3:1; cf. 10:9), and surely Jesus and all his disciples followed this Jewish rhythm of prayer.
- ▶ *It connects us with a wider community of disciples.* “When we engage in fixed-hour prayer we are praying prayers that the Church has written down and prayed for centuries,” Barton observes. “This way of praying affirms that we are not alone, that we are part of a much larger reality – the communion of saints that came before us, those who are alive on the planet now, and all who will come after us. In a spiritual sense, praying with the Church through fixed-hour prayer expresses that deeper unity that transcends all our divisions – and that is no small thing.”

Study Questions

1. Compare fixed-hour prayer to other daily devotional practices of Scripture-reading and prayer. What makes it different?
2. What merit does Ruth Haley Barton see in a practice of fixed-hour prayer? Why is there a growing interest in it today?
3. Discuss Scott McKnight’s observation: “Living within the sweet caresses of the hours of prayer is the simplest and easiest way to consecrate our entire day as service to God.”
4. Consider the obstacles you might face in praying this way each day. How would you overcome them?
5. Jean-François Millet’s famous painting *The Angelus* depicts a fixed-hour prayer. What is striking to you about this image?

Departing Hymn: “Sweet Hour of Prayer” (vv. 1 and 2)

Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!
that calls me from a world of care,
and bids me at my Father’s throne
make all my wants and wishes known.
In seasons of distress and grief,
my soul has often found relief
and oft escaped the tempter’s snare
by thy return, sweet hour of prayer!

Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!
the joys I feel, the bliss I share,
of those whose anxious spirits burn
with strong desires for thy return!
With such I hasten to the place
where God my savior shows his face,
and gladly take my station there,
and wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer!

William Walford (1845)

Tune: GOLDEN CHAIN

† Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 126

Sweet Hours of Prayer

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider the merits of the ancient Jewish and Christian practice of fixed-hour prayer.
2. To discuss the obstacles we might face in pursuing this form of prayer.
3. To identify print and online resources for members who want to begin this practice.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Sweet Hour of Prayer” locate the familiar tune GOLDEN CHAIN in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“The first time I participated in fixed-hour prayer, I felt like I had come home to a place that I had never been and yet a place in which I truly belonged,” Ruth Haley Barton reports. “It was a simple evening prayer service signaling the beginning of a spiritual retreat with a few likeminded souls...”

“Some of the prayers were read in unison, some were read responsively – and I just lost myself in the beauty and simplicity of it all. Instead of having to think really, really hard about what to pray, I gave myself to the beauty of words that expressed deep longings and powerful praises that were true in me but I could never have found the words to say. Instead of getting caught up in the ego’s attempts to say something profound to God (and to the people around me!), I actually rested from all of that and *prayed*. Instead of listening to someone else’s interpretation or application of Scripture, I heard Scripture read without comment and listened for what God was saying to me in the context of our relationship. Instead of having to endure culturally relevant programming, this small group of us settled into a silence that was so rich and satisfying that I lost all track of time until someone finally nudged me to remind me that it was my turn to read Scripture! That was ten years ago and I have been praying that way ever since” (*Prayer*, 36-37).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study introduces the ancient Jewish and Christian practice of fixed-hour prayer. The practice varies in the number, length, and plans for the daily prayer sessions (“divine hours” or “offices”). Share several examples of

fixed-hour prayer books. Valuable resources like *The Book of Common Prayer* (<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/>) and *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book* (<http://www.ambs.edu/prayerbook>) can be downloaded for free. Ruth Haley Barton commends three valuable, easy-to-use prayer books: Phyllis Tickle's *The Divine Hours*, Edward S. Gleason's *Hour by Hour*, and *Little Book of Hours* from The Community of Jesus.

Study Questions

1. Forms of fixed-hour prayer have been practiced widely within intentional religious communities and in traditional Roman Catholic parishes, Anglican congregations, and Orthodox churches. The practice has been less common among other mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Pentecostal Christians. The latter have promoted similar daily practices of devotional reading and prayer – e.g., using devotionals from a denominational booklet, reading meditatively through the Psalms, following a lectionary of daily or weekly scripture readings, reading through all or part of the Bible each year, using a daily prayer list, meeting with congregants for daily or weekly prayer, and so on. Encourage members who have followed some of these practices to compare them to fixed-hour prayer.
2. The merit Ruth Haley Barton sees in fixed-hour prayer – nourishing community and friendship with other Christians, both now and through history; offering a direct and meaningful encounter with Scripture; fostering a habit of spiritual attentiveness through the day, which enriches the meaning of all one's work; developing a deeper relationship with the Triune God through prayer and recounting God's actions in history; offering opportunities for confession of sin and forgiveness – are also reasons for the growing interest in the practice today. Many Christians are hungry for a historically "thicker," more public form of discipleship that is not restricted to a "religious section" of their lives.
3. Just as following the Church year brings spiritual order to the weeks and months of our time, the daily offices give spiritual order to the hours of each day. Other events of our day – the meals we prepare, the words of encouragement we speak, the scheduled duties we perform, and the chance meetings we embrace – become rich in meaning as they are framed by and, in turn, help inform the sessions of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession.
4. Some obstacles involve *scheduling*: not enough time, inflexible work schedules, frequently changing schedules, traveling on the road, being constantly "on call" to serve others, etc. Others involve *lack of privacy*: no personal place at work, no quiet place at home, etc. *Lack of motivation* can be a problem: disappointment over lack of spiritual "results," guilt over forgetting some sessions and "falling behind," fear that others will think one is "too religious," lack of interest and support from one's family or coworkers, etc. *Spiritual distractions* must be faced: emotional or physical tiredness from serving others, spiritual apathy, shame from un-confessed sin, habits of distracting busyness or entertainments, etc. *Lack of resources* of useable, well-designed prayer books. Encourage members to list their top three or four obstacles, and brainstorm how to approach them. Perhaps they need to start with a more modest and realistic schedule of sessions, recruit friends to pray with them, find an electronic prayer book that travels on their computer, etc.
5. In this morning, noon, and evening devotion, practiced in traditional Roman Catholic parishes and some Anglican and Lutheran congregations, the church bell calls followers to recount the faithfulness of Mary, through whom God became incarnate in Christ Jesus. The name "Angelus" derives from the first word of the devotion ("*Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae*" / "The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary"), which concludes with this prayer: "Lord, fill our hearts with your love, and as you revealed to us by an angel, the coming of your Son as man. So lead us through his suffering and death to the glory of his resurrection, for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen."

Members may note the structuring of daily labor around this devotional prayer, the peasants' sincerity, or the integration of their devotion into a majestic open sky and landscape.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.