

## **Fixed Hour Prayer: Recovering A Rich Spiritual Discipline**

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I knew it was going to be necessary to explain what fixed hour prayer was when I was in a colleague's office not long ago and I told him that the format for our morning devotions at church was going to be changing. He asked me what was going to change. I told him that we were going to begin observing the morning office of prayer. And his response to me was, "I have no idea what the heck that is!"

I knew exactly how he felt because until recently I had no idea what the heck it was either. I had graduated from a Christian university, majoring in Bible and philosophy, and from a well-known seminary, and in all my time at these two institutions, I had never even heard of the "daily offices of prayer." And I must admit, it sounded a bit monkish, if not downright Romish, when I first heard it explained. Our own church history, however, told me a different story and pointed me in a different direction. And with all of the cultural changes taking place as a result of the postmodern condition, a recovery of fixed hour prayer may be just what the doctor ordered for those of us longing for community and a connection with the past.

### **Fixed Hour Prayer: What is it?**

Put simply, when we talk about observing fixed hour prayer, all we are saying is that, from ancient Israel on down to the present day, it has been a mark of Christian spirituality to set aside certain fixed times during the day for prayer.

Centuries before the arrival of Christ, the psalmist wrote, "Seven times a day do I praise you", making specific reference to fixed hour prayer. Remember, too, the story of Daniel, and how the very thing that landed him in the lion's den was his commitment to keeping the daily offices of prayer. The Bible tells us that three times a day Daniel retreated to his room, opened his window towards Jerusalem, got down on his knees, and prayed to his God.

We also know that by the time Rome had established its empire across the world of its day, the Jews, God's chosen people who had been removed from the Promised Land and dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, longed for days gone by when they would gather as a community to pray at fixed hours during the day. So, in order to satisfy that longing for community, wherever Jews would find themselves, they would stop at those fixed hours during the day and pray, knowing that throughout the Roman Empire there were fellow Jews praying with them at the same time and praying the same prayers. So while physically they

were separated, by observing the fixed hours of prayer, spiritually they were united once again in community.

It is also interesting to note that the first detailed miracle of the Apostolic Church, the healing of the lame man on the temple steps by Peter and John, occurred where and when it did because two devout Christians, Peter and John, were on their way to the temple for mid-afternoon prayers (Acts 3).

And while we don't know the exact content of these early prayers, we do know that they were fixed prayers that had come down to them from the traditional worship practices of Israel.

The Early church fathers carried on this spiritual discipline of keeping, what they came to call, "the divine hours." And while we don't know the particular details of their practice, we do know that they normally observed prayers in the early morning (prime), at 9 a.m. (terce), noon (sext), 3 p.m. (none), 6 p.m. (vespers), and before bed (compline).

We also know that, while these prayers could be said in a group or alone, they were never individualistic in nature. They prayed the prayers that had been passed down to them from earlier saints. Every Christian was to observe these particular prayers and no one was allowed to create new ones. This did not mean, though, that they never said their own words in prayer. They did. But during these fixed hours of prayer they willingly joined hands with other Christians around the world and all those who had lived and died before them by praying the same thing that those before them had prayed.

### **Fixed Hour Prayer: Why do it?**

Unfortunately, because of historical movements such as the Enlightenment and Revivalism, we modern Protestants, at least those who have lived in the last 450 years, have made spirituality such an individual thing that we have lost our vision of being part of a community. So, for many of us, salvation consists solely in having a personal relationship with Jesus. It's all about our individual standing before God. It's all about a personal decision that we make in our hearts. And while all of these things are true, good and right, they are incomplete. When these things are considered outside the context of community and our relationship, not only to Christ, but his church, we are out of step with God's intended purposes for his people. God intends salvation and sanctification to be, not only individual, but also communal.

The good news is, there seems to be an obvious longing, not just in the church, but in our culture across the board, for a recovery of community. People are beginning to realize just how important community is. They find that they are increasingly lonely in a world that has isolated the individual from a surrounding community.

So it seems that the recent push in our culture for community paves the way for the ancient practice of keeping the “divine hours”. Because when we practice fixed hour prayer, we find ourselves amidst God’s larger community of saints, past, present, and future, who have prayed, are praying, or one day will pray these very prayers at these set times. And so, in keeping the “divine hours” we join with the multitudes of God’s people throughout time offering to God that sweet smelling aroma that accompanies the prayers of His people.

To help you catch a vision for what is being said, I want to quote at length Phyllis Tickle who has written 3 prayer books that I have used in my attempts to observe the various offices of prayer. Tickle says:

Within the third century, the Desert Fathers, the earliest monks of the Church, began to pursue the universal Christian mandate to “pray without ceasing”(1Thes.5:17). To accomplish this, they devised the strategy, within their communities, of having one group of monks pass the praying of an office on seamlessly to another group of monks waiting to commence the next office. The result was the introduction into Christian thinking of the concept of a continuous cascade of prayer before the throne of God.

Christians today, wherever they practice the discipline of fixed-hour prayer, frequently find themselves filled with a conscious awareness that they are handing their worship, at it’s final “Amen”, on to other Christians in the next time zone. Like relay runners passing a lighted torch, those who do the work of fixed-hour prayer do create a continuous cascade of praise before the throne of God. To participate in such a regimen with such an awareness is to pray, as the Desert Fathers did, from within the spiritual community of shared texts as well as within the company of innumerable other Christians, unseen but present, who have preceded us across time or who, in time, will follow us.

What a sweet picture and a sanctifying vision. It would serve us well, I believe, if we took seriously the benefits received by observing fixed hour prayers. To be sure, this should not take the place of other types of praying (planned, extemporaneous, etc.), nor should we substitute this spiritual discipline for all others. But adding this proven practice to our arsenal of spiritual disciplines may go a long way as we seek daily to fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil in our time.