


THE RHYTHM OF RENEWAL

A photograph of a rugged mountain range with snow patches, overlaid with a white wireframe geometric shape. The wireframe is a complex, multi-faceted structure that appears to be a 3D projection of a cube or a similar polyhedron, rendered in white lines against the dark, textured background of the mountains. The mountains are dark brown and grey, with several patches of snow scattered across their slopes and peaks. The sky is a pale, overcast grey.

RENEW COMMUNITIES

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Throughout the story of Christianity, followers of Jesus have recognized the power of setting discipleship practices and disciplines into place, in order to build some consistency into spirituality. The monastic communities called them their Rule of Life, and many others have spoken of spiritual disciplines, or, more recently, of rhythms of discipleship.

These rhythms can be personal or corporate, tailored or syndicated, but their aim is the same. You will be better equipped to follow Jesus in all the ups and downs of life, especially on those days (and weeks) when you don't much feel like following through.

Discipleship practices give a sense of order, of spiritual structure and guidance, to guide you towards the deliberate discipleship goals that you have identified as a family or community. On good days they are delightful scenery, while on bad days they are essential boundaries and guideposts that keep you moving further down the route that Jesus has set out before you. The Rhythm of Renewal serves as such a guide.

Enjoy the journey!

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INTRODUCTION

Andy Sikora

I am not handy.

Some guys are do-it-yourselfers. When they need to make home repairs or upgrades, their first thought is “I can do this!” My first thought is, “Who can I call to get this done?” For me, the problem is that I just don’t know how to do any of it. I don’t know how to build or fix things. I have no knowledge of plumbing, or heating and cooling. When it comes to doing almost any home project, I just don’t know how.

About a year ago we moved into a new house, and there were a few little things that needed to be fixed or upgraded. In the interest of saving money, I decided to try and do it myself. The first job I decided to tackle was replacing two bathroom faucets.

I started where any other brilliant handyman would start: YouTube. I watched -- and rewatched -- a handful of videos on how to replace a bathroom faucet. I needed to learn as much as I possibly could, and these YouTubers were my instructors. After an hour or so, I felt like I knew how to complete the project, so I got to work. One thing immediately became clear: I did not know what I was doing.

I knew which tools I needed for this project. I knew how to turn off the water, loosen the pipes, and remove the existing faucet. I knew what I had to do to install the new faucet so that it wouldn’t leak. I had all the information I needed in order to complete the project -- I just didn’t KNOW what I was doing. I’m proud to say I didn’t give up, although I’m not proud of what came out of my mouth while I was doing it! But after just a few hours more than the YouTube videos had said it would take, I finished replacing the first of the two faucets.

After taking a few days to decompress, I felt ready to tackle the second faucet. I gathered my tools and began the process again. Something surprising -- almost miraculous -- took place in that bathroom that day. I knew what I was doing. A job that, just a few days prior, had taken me hours took less than half an hour that day. Why? Because I knew how to do it. In the process of replacing the first faucet, I had gained knowledge, and had newfound confidence that I could accomplish what I had set out to do.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWING AND KNOWING

There is a big difference between knowing things from learning about them, and knowing things from living them. This little book is all about the kind of knowing that comes from living life in the way of Jesus.

John 8 describes Jesus talking to a large group of people who are new believers in Him as the Son of God. In the middle of this, He begins to talk to them about living the life they were made to live -- the life God had in mind all the way back when He first created Adam and Eve.

In verses 31 and 32 Jesus says "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Associating truth with freedom isn't an idea that is unique to Jesus. It's something we do all the time. If you're living a lie and you're afraid that others will find out about it, you can feel stuck or wrapped up. If you're telling lies, you can live your whole life trapped by the fear that someday others will find out. On the other hand, if you spend your life believing a lie, then you aren't really experiencing the fullness that this life has to offer because you just don't know any better. Your life is restricted because you don't know the truth.

Unfortunately, in Christian circles we tend to view truth as something that we believe. This way of thinking suggests that if we gain enough knowledge -- key thoughts, right beliefs, solid doctrine -- then we'll find freedom. We are right to seek after these things, but this isn't the kind of knowing Jesus talks about in John 8.

Jesus says that we can know the truth by holding to His teaching. This is more than just doing what He says. Holding to His teaching is much more than just following the rules or doing the right thing. In the English Standard Version of the Bible, “if you hold to my teaching” is translated, “if you abide in my word.” When Jesus says “if you hold to my teaching,” he’s really saying, “if you live in my teachings.” Jesus is inviting you to make your home in His commands. This is all about where you live -- it’s all about where you make your home.

For a moment, picture the house, apartment or dorm room where you live. You don’t have to think about living there -- you just live there. It’s your home. It’s your place of refuge. It’s the place you retreat, rest, celebrate. It’s the space you invite others into for fun. Where you live is where you belong. All of this is true about the place where you live because it’s home -- it’s where your life happens!

With that in mind Jesus says if you are really his disciple, you will make your home in his teachings. His teachings will be where you live. So, what are His teachings? There’s a lot to say about this, but Jesus simplified his teachings for us by saying:

Love God with all you have, and,
Love your neighbor as yourself.

That’s it. That’s the list.

This book is about *The Rhythm of Renewal*. We’ll talk about these five practices:



READ



EAT



NEIGHBOR



EMPOWER



WAIT

We'll talk about how you and your family can make these practices a regular part of your life, and how you might be able to invite others to join you.

It's important to note, though, that these things aren't a list of rules or new religious hoops for you to jump through. They are simply five ways to live in Jesus' teachings in your everyday life. You should look at these five practices as natural activities for those who want to live in Jesus' teachings in their everyday lives. They are the natural responses of a disciple of Jesus in today's society.

The Rhythm of Renewal is not about knowing more facts; it's about knowing the truth as Jesus describes it in John 8. It isn't about knowing something someone else taught you, it is about knowing from doing the things Jesus commands us to do.

IT WAS FOR FREEDOM

One of the reasons that this rhythm is so important is because of what Jesus is promising to those who know the truth, and that's freedom. As a pastor, I have the opportunity to talk with people all the time who are experiencing something other than freedom in their personal lives. They are frustrated because they don't know the why, where or how to find Truth. There are many who walk around in chains that they can't shake off no matter how much they know. In fact, sometimes more knowledge just makes the weight heavier. Often during hard times we focus on the weight of it all -- the frustration, the pain and the confusion that we are experiencing. But what we're looking for is the freedom that Jesus promises in John 8 -- that peace that passes all understanding. All we want is to be renewed. Jesus says if we make our home in His teachings we'll find truth and freedom. The Rhythm of Renewal is an invitation to this life.

I should also say this: there is great freedom in how to practice this rhythm. We have provided many ideas about how you and your family might live out these activities, but everyone's life is different. You might be more creative than we are. The truth is that, in following Jesus, you're probably going to hear Him speak to you in a very specific, very personal manner. He might guide you to methods that fit you and your family better than any of the

things we suggest at the end of each chapter. And that's great! We're not trying to prescribe anything to you; we only hope to describe what it might look like for you to follow Jesus in this way, and what might happen as a result. But really, how you live this out is between you and Jesus.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO OUR CHURCH

Most churches measure their effectiveness by counting engagement and involvement. If there are more people attending, giving, or signing up for various programs, many churches take this as a sign that the church is effectively accomplishing its mission. And it might be, if the mission is to get more people involved, attending and giving. But that is not the mission of our church. Our church's mission is to see whole communities renewed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We can count whatever we want within the church, but community renewal takes place where God's people live, work and play -- outside of our walls.

The Rhythm of Renewal is what will make or break us, when it comes to the vision God's laid on our hearts. It may not seem like much: sharing meals, praying, blessing your neighbors or coworkers, reading your Bible -- but you living in this rhythm may be the way that God's Kingdom expands in your neighborhood or at your workplace or school. Your participation matters.

Throughout history, as long as the church has existed, God's movement has spread through ordinary Christians living on mission together. It's never been about the big organizations, nice buildings, or killer worship services -- it's always been about people like you living out the teachings of Jesus and inviting others to join Him.



READ

WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN A WONDERFUL GIFT FROM GOD IN THE FORM OF THE BIBLE. BY DELVING INTO IT, WE LEARN ABOUT GOD, OURSELVES, OUR WORLD AND THE MISSION JESUS MODELED AND PASSED ON TO EACH OF US. WE READ, MEMORIZE AND MEDITATE ON IT DAILY.

PRACTICE

Each day, spend time reading and memorizing the Bible. Ask yourself what the Scripture is saying, and how it applies to your life and the lives of those around you. Pray that God would work in your life according to what you've read that day.

THE POWER OF A GREAT STORY

Curtis Carnes

I hate reading. Or at least, that's what I would have told you in high school. When "Anna Karenina" was assigned in English class, I was the first person heading to the video rental store to raid the classics section. Anything to avoid actually reading the assigned book!

I did whatever it took to get out of reading, whether at home or at school. Then I came across a book called Ender's Game, a sci-fi novel. I don't know why I picked it up, but from the first page, I was hooked! The story was compelling, the characters interesting, and I really felt like I was part of the book. I couldn't put it down.

But here's the thing: For most of us the Bible doesn't feel like this at all!

Even after I finished Ender's Game and discovered what a book could be, the Bible didn't feel like this for me either.

It still didn't feel like a compelling story. Instead, it felt like a textbook!

TEXTBOOK VS. STORY

What thoughts or emotions does a textbook evoke in you? Does it make you anxious, thinking of all you have to learn before a big test? Does it make you antsy with boredom?

When I think of a textbook, I think of an assignment: something I am required to do. A textbook makes me think of reading just the few sections of the book that relate to my current assignment, so I can find the answers to a certain set of questions.

The Bible felt like a textbook to me: a reference manual one must dutifully read to be a good Christian.

But then, everything changed! My wife and I started attending a small church in Chicago that viewed the Bible differently: as a compelling Story with plot twists, tension and doubt, hope and rescue. The pastor spoke of the Bible as an active story that is still unfolding -- and the Author is inviting me to play a part in it! That's when I fell in love with the Bible. I realized I had been viewing it through the wrong lens all along.

Maybe you're like me, and the Bible feels more like a textbook than a story book. Just imagine what could happen if the Bible came alive to you, like the gripping story it is!

THE STORY COMPELS YOU

Stories have power. They get into to your heart, into your bones. Good stories have the power to do things to you. They compel you. They move you. They call you to act.

When I was in college the Bible did not compel me and in hindsight I can tell you exactly why. I only knew half the Story and I was a little off on the ending. My internal storyline of the Bible went like this: We were fallen people and Jesus came to save us so that we can go to heaven when we die.

Because of this belief, I went to a Bible College in the first place. I felt like I needed to commit my life to getting as many people to heaven as possible. The Bible was my reference manual for accomplishing this task. Everything else about our world, I felt, was a distraction.

Then, at this small church in Chicago, I discovered the whole story, with the right ending. Since then, I've devoured the Bible over and over again.

The whole story goes something like this: We were created, in relationship with God, to flood this world with the knowledge, goodness, and love of the Creator, over all people and over all domains of society. The Fall corrupted

this vocation and our relationship with God. Israel, and in turn Jesus, came to reinstate both our relationship to God and our creational vocation. When we're united with Jesus our job is flooding our world with God's love, over all peoples and domains of society. We know the time is coming when God will come back, take the work we have done, and bring it to completion by fusing Heaven and Earth together once again.

The Bible Project has a great six-minute video entitled, "Animated Explanation of 'Heaven & Earth'" that you can find on their website, jointhebibleproject.com.

Knowing the whole Story changed my life in two ways. First, it means that everything I do matters. If God desires to restore ALL of creation, this means my work matters, my family life matters, gardening matters, making good food matters, businesses matter, enjoying a sunset matters, having fun matters, social issues matter... All of creation, no matter how big or small, matters!

Second, this story compelled me to learn more. I became engrossed in the plot and felt as though I was a part of the story. I wanted to read the Bible! It was no longer a textbook to me; it became the Story I was called to find my place in.

THE STORY CHANGES YOU

When you read the Bible like a textbook, it's easy to engage with it in a detached way. Take this bit, leave that one. Engage with the head and not the heart.

But stories are not like that. Stories change you, whether you are looking for change or not.

For me, a recent example of this is *The Hunger Games*. In this book, the residents of twelve colonies live in destitution to ensure the lavish lifestyles of those in the Capital.

Since reading this book, my eyes have been opened to many of the ways that first world countries exploit the poor. While I was always aware of this inequality on an intellectual level, the book raised my awareness on an emotional level. It changed my heart! When I picked up *The Hunger Games*, I was looking for a fun read. But change is what I got!

This is why Jesus spoke in parables. This is why Israel told and retold the stories of how God acted on their behalf. This is why Paul weaves together the stories of Israel and of Jesus tell the fresh story of new creation. Stories have the power to change us. Let the Story change you!

THE STORY CALLS YOU TO ACT

God's Story is not over, and He's calling you to be an actor who pushes the narrative to its final conclusion: the coming together of Heaven and Earth. It's calling you to imagine what this world will look like restored to wholeness by God, and start to make it happen here and now.

When an actor signs to play a role in a movie, he begins by reading the script, over and over again. Once he knows the script, he can understand the plot and characters, and is familiar with where they have been and where they are going. He studies the script because he has a role to play.

Once I understood that I had a role to play within the Story of God, it changed everything for me. I started viewing the Bible as a Script, rather than a textbook. I started to consume it, so I could get to know the plot, its characters, its symbols, its evolving themes, where the story was heading, and most importantly, my role in helping it get there.

The Story is also calling you to act.

This is why READ is a part of the Renew Rhythm. We believe that the Bible is a Story that's going somewhere. It has the power to change us, and calls us to further the plot. We want to encourage everyone to make reading the Bible a regular rhythm in their week.

Here are three questions that can help you begin your journey of reading the Bible as a Story. Try using these questions as you read through scripture.

1. What compels you about this story?
2. How does this story change you?
3. How does this story call you to act?

RESOURCES

These three resources helped me shift the way I view the Bible:

1. [Covenant and Kingdom](#) by Mike Breen
2. [Simply Good News](#) by N.T. Wright
3. [The Drama of Scripture](#) by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen

TRY READ



INDIVIDUAL

- Choose a book like Philippians, and read it every day for a week. Answer the questions: What compels you about this story? How does this story change you? How is this story calling you to act?
- Commit to a year-long Bible reading plan. Use the tips at the end of this chapter to view the Bible as Story.
- Use your commute to work to listen to an audio Bible.
- Read Covenant and Kingdom by Mike Breen or Simply Good News by NT Wright to get a bird's eye view of the Bible.
- Apply the Story to your life by writing down an action plan to obey what God is telling you.

FAMILY

- Purchase a children's story Bible and read one story a night with your children.
- Choose a story from the Bible and act it out as a family. When you are done, ask your kids how you can act it out in real life.
- Let your teenager choose a book and read through it together.
- Use the READ exercise questions above to process a passage with your spouse.
- Lead your family by example, by letting them know how you interact with the Bible.

GROUP

- Check out How to use the Bible in a Missional Community on Renew's Resource Page.
- Choose a book of the Bible and study it as a group.
- Use the READ exercise questions above to process a passage of scripture as a group.
- Share a NOW word with the group using the Fresh Bread technique.
- Share how you are hearing and obeying God.



EAT

EATING TOGETHER HAS BEEN A CENTRAL CHRISTIAN PRACTICE SINCE THE BEGINNING OF OUR MOVEMENT. IT FOSTERS FELLOWSHIP AND COMMUNITY, AND ACTS AS AN INVITATION TO SHARE LIFE AS WE SHARE A TABLE WITH OTHERS.

PRACTICE

I will eat at least 2 meals (or coffee, dessert, etc.) with others this week. Eat once with a person from our church or your Missional Community and once with a non-Christian.

THE POWER OF A SIMPLE MEAL

Curtis Carnes

Growing up my favorite verse in the Bible was 1 Corinthians 10:31. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

I liked this verse because I loved to eat! Although I liked the verse for silly reasons, I have come to find out that eating is one of the most kingdom-oriented activities we can participate in, and one that can literally change the world.

To find out why this is the case, we have to first explore the relationship between rats, addictions, the Vietnam war, and human connection.

RATS, ADDICTIONS, THE VIETNAM WAR, AND HUMAN CONNECTION

In his New York Times bestseller "Chasing The Scream: The First And Last Days of the War on Drugs," Johann Hari writes about a remarkable study on addiction. In working to understand addiction, scientists conducted an experiment. A rat is placed in a cage with two water bottles: one filled with water, and the other filled with a mixture of water and heroin or cocaine. Almost every time the experiment is run, the rat becomes obsessed with the drugs, consuming more and more until it eventually kills itself.

In the 70's a professor of psychology named Bruce Alexander wondered whether the outcome would change if the rats were given a more exciting habitat. He built what he called Rat Park: a cage with colored balls, the best rat food, tunnels to play in, and lots of rat friends! And still, the two bottles -- one with water, and one with a mixture of water and drugs.

Alexander's rats tried both bottles, but they didn't become addicted. In fact, they avoided the drugged water.

Alexander pushed the experiment further. He put rats in isolation and let them become addicted to drugs. After 52 days, the isolated rats were introduced to the Rat Park with the other, healthy rats. The addicted rats suffered some withdrawal symptoms, but after a short time these rats were also avoiding the drugged water and living a normal life.

Around this same time, the Vietnam war was ending. Heroin use was high among soldiers; Time Magazine reported that 20 percent were addicted. The public feared what would happen when soldiers returned home from the horrors of war.

But what happened was the same thing that happened to the addicted rats that were moved into Rat Park. When returning soldiers were back in healthy communities with people who loved them, they simply stopped using heroin. No rehab; they just stopped.

Professor Peter Cohen argues that human beings have a deep need to bond and form connections. It's how we get our satisfaction. If we can't connect with each other, we will connect with anything we can find. In effect, a heroin addict has bonded with heroin because he or she couldn't bond as fully with anything else. So the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. It is human connection.

Let that sit for a moment: The opposite of addiction is human connection.

JESUS' RAT PARK

Tax collectors and prostitutes were the rats of Jesus' society. People barely even considered them human. They were just rats. Sharing a meal was the litmus test for whether someone was in or out, good or bad. You eat with those like you and no one else. The table was the great divider.

Jesus knew this, and began eating with all the wrong people. He was creating his own Rat Park.

And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. - Luke 5:29-32 ESV

Religious people in Jesus' day operated under this principle: Sin creates separation. And their behavior testified to this. If you're a sinner, we are going to separate from you. Jesus flipped this concept on its head. Perhaps it is separation that creates sin. Operating under this principle, Jesus didn't separate himself from undesirable people, he joined them for a meal! He understood that the antidote to sin is human connection. He understood that separation may perpetuate sin, rather than curb it.

Jesus regularly said one of the most provocative things you could say in his day, and ours as well: "Want to have lunch?"

Eating together was at the core of Jesus' ministry. So much so that people labeled Jesus a glutton (Luke 7:34)! Jesus ate with all and sundry. Everyone could sit at his table! From poor to rich, prostitute to scholar, he shared food with everyone, and everyone belonged. Jesus used the table to unite people rather than divide.

Strange things began to happen. Tax collectors began giving their fortunes to the poor. Prostitutes became celibate. The broken were healed. The wealthy began to rethink their way of life. People from different classes and races began to eat with each other as brothers and sisters. The bonds of sin and addiction were broken. All because Jesus took time to connect with others over a meal! Separated people were connecting with God because Jesus took to time to connect with them.

Who knew a simple meal could have this kind of power? Yet breaking bread together remains a fundamental way in which you can show people God's love and grace. This is why the table has so much power today.

Sharing a meal has the power to unite, transform, and serve as a prophetic announcement of the kingdom.

- No matter what kind of person you are, no matter what class, religion, race, or economic level, at the table you're accepted. You belong!
- Where two or three are gathered together in God's name, the power of His kingdom is there also. That power can change lives and relationships.
- A table where everyone belongs gives a glimpse of God's future world where the diversity of humankind will sit united under God.

EATING YOUR WAY INTO GOD'S KINGDOM

Surprised that eating is at the core of Jesus' ministry? Jesus was the master at taking things we do every day and making them spiritual. You eat roughly 1095 meals a year -- and that doesn't even include dessert, snacks or coffee! What if you used even 10 percent of those mealtimes to build connections that shower the people in your life with God's love? That would be roughly two meals, coffee breaks or dessert each week. Imagine the human, or even God-sized connections you'd form! Imagine all the transformation that could happen because people were able to connect to God through you and you were able to connect to God through them! Imagine if all Christians practiced the rhythm of EAT. It would change the world!

TRY EAT



INDIVIDUAL

- Invite a coworker to lunch.
- Take a friend to coffee.
- Have a late night dessert with another mom.
- Plan a morning breakfast with someone before work.
- Invite someone to share dinner with you.

FAMILY

- Invite your neighbors to a cookout.
- Have some friends over for pizza and games.
- Pass out popsicles to the neighborhood kids.
- Make s'mores with another family around a campfire.
- Gather a few different families for a soup potluck.

GROUP

- Share a meal during a group meeting.
- Go out for dessert after a group gathering.
- Get to know someone who just joined the group by sharing a meal with them.
- Plan a dinner party with your group and invite those who don't yet belong.
- Have a potluck picnic in the park and invite strangers in the park to help themselves



NEIGHBORING

EVERY CHRISTIAN IS A MISSIONARY SENT TO CARRY THE HOPE WE'VE FOUND BACK TO THE PLACES WE LIVE, WORK AND PLAY. WE DO THIS BY ACTIVELY LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS - THOSE WE ARE LIVING NEXT TO (AT HOME, WORK, SCHOOL, THE GYM, ETC.) - THROUGH INTENTIONAL BLESSING AND SHARING WITH THEM THE HOPE WE HAVE FOUND IN CHRIST.

PRACTICE

I will ask myself once daily (in places of life intersection), "Who has God sent me to love?" and "How can I share the hope I've found in Christ with my neighbors?"

NEIGHBORING

Andy Sikora

Have you ever thought about how easy it is to be somewhere and not really be there? To live somewhere but not really be present? To fill a seat but be totally unaware of who or what is around you? It's easy to live life next to someone for years and never really get to know them, to encounter someone and not even know they're there.

There are people I've seen every day for years at the coffee shop or gym or walking their dogs in my neighborhood. Next-door neighbors I've never met. I've never gotten their names.

Don't get me wrong, I knew things about them - I just never got to know them. Maybe this is how you "know" your neighbors too. There was the curly haired lady with a dog. The hipster who reads the big library books every morning at the coffee shop. The guy whose TV I could see through his front window, who watched all the same sporting events I did. That family with all the kids and the red minivan. I knew things about them, but never met them or got to know them in any real way.

I had plenty of reasons: I was busy. They always seemed busy. It might be weird - especially after seeing them day in and day out for years and never reaching out. What if I spent time getting to know them and it turned out they weren't the kind of people I'd enjoy being friends with?

Have you ever thought about how your presence or lack of presence may be impacting those you're living life next to? Have you ever thought about what they may think about you? Or worse - have you thought about what your lack of engagement may say to them about what you think about them?

JESUS NOTICES

Jesus is traveling from Judea to Galilee. This is a major road trip for Jesus and his disciples. Judea and Galilee were 70 miles apart and they are making the journey by foot.

Can you imagine walking 70 miles?

Jesus and his crew make a pit stop in Samaria for food, water and probably some much needed rest. While the disciples go in search of food, Jesus grabs a seat at the well in the middle of the town. As he's sitting there resting, probably hoping for a way to get a drink of water, a woman comes to draw some water for herself.

It's important that we get this picture right. We have two total strangers alone at this well in the middle of the day, and Jesus breaks the silence by asking her for a drink.

Now, there are plenty of reasons this was awkward. First and foremost, these two are strangers! They've never met before, they don't know each other, they've never even seen each other. Bigger than that, though, is their ethnicity puts them at odds with each other. Samaritans and Jews hated each other. Each group believed the other got everything wrong - especially what they thought about worshiping God - and so they avoided each other. When they couldn't avoid each other, they often fought. But Jesus asked for the water anyway.

What's interesting about this encounter is that within a few seconds the conversation moves from Jesus' request for a drink of water to this woman's most intimate relationships, and a solution to this woman's biggest problems.

In no time they move from strangers to something much more.

Jesus fascinates me. Of course his mission, his teachings, his death and resurrection all grab hold of my heart, but lately I've been fascinated by all

the casual encounters Jesus had with people. I'm fascinated by the way he engages with people in normal everyday activities, and by the interactions he has with those around him.

Think about the time Jesus had dinner at Zacchaeus' house. Here is Jesus, just passing through Jericho, and the people all gather near the road to get a glimpse of this man who's developing quite the reputation as a healer and teacher. As Jesus is walking, he gets a glimpse of this tax collector, who had climbed up in a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Zacchaeus was the most hated man in the city. He had stolen from everyone. He had sided with the enemy. Jesus - the man of the hour - recognizes him, probably by way of reputation, and says "Let's get some food."

This is shocking to everyone around. "Why," they wondered, "would this Jesus, who seems to have a close connection with God, want to share a meal with someone so wicked?" What's even more shocking, to me, is that Jesus wanted to have dinner with someone that he didn't even know.

There's another time when Jesus and his disciples are traveling to Jerusalem, and this blind man who is begging on the side of the road just starts yelling out for Jesus. This is the equivalent of someone you've never met yelling at you as you drive past them. At the very least, this would catch us by surprise. Depending on the circumstances, it might even scare us. But Jesus isn't scared. Instead he stops and asks this man directly, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Two men who had never met before -- one very important and one ignored and cast off by society -- standing face to face, and now engaged in one of the most important conversations of this blind man's life. The man says, "I want to be able to see" and boom! Jesus restores his sight.

Here's what's so fascinating to me about these stories - and there are plenty more like them in all four Gospel accounts - normal people are doing normal things and they encounter Jesus right in the middle of their everyday lives. They weren't going somewhere special, they weren't attending an event,

they weren't even seeking Jesus out. They were just going about their everyday lives, and they encountered Jesus and it radically changed them!

It may be hard for us to think of Jesus doing normal things -- we've exalted all of Jesus' actions to a mythical level. For years my oldest daughter thought any story about Jesus had to have taken place in Heaven instead of on earth, because they were all so amazing and miraculous! But Jesus did normal, everyday things. He did the same kind of things we do. Jesus went on long road trips, he stopped for pit stops, he would strike up conversations with total strangers just to pass time, he would grab a meal with a new acquaintance or be captivated by the needs of those around him. In fact, it seems like these are the kinds of things that Jesus did more than almost anything else.

When we read about the things that Jesus did and said, it's easy to just categorize it as all part of God's cosmic plan. Or on the flip side, we try to explain them away as things that just happened in the course of everyday life. But I think it's important to really understand which one it is. Were all of these encounters in everyday life part of God's big cosmic plan, or were they things that just happened?

What if they're both?

What if these chance encounters, these random conversations, these things that unexpectedly caught Jesus' attention in the midst of everyday life are all part of God's cosmic plan? When you really think about all that Jesus says and does, it starts making sense.

In one of his "chance encounters" Jesus is asked by a religious leader what the greatest commandment is. Jesus says "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'^[c] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[d] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself.

Love God and love your Neighbor.

As you watch Jesus' life, as you listen to him talk, you begin to realize that Jesus saw anyone he was living life next to, as his neighbor. The woman at the well was his neighbor. The blind beggar on the side of the road was his neighbor. The tree-climbing tax collector was his neighbor. So Jesus easily connected these normal everyday activities and interactions to God's big cosmic plan because all the law and the prophets hung on these two commands.

What if that's true for our lives too?

What if how you interact with the people living life alongside you - where you live, work and play - is God's cosmic plan for your life?

What might happen if you truly love your neighbor?

GOD'S PRESENCE

Presence is one of the most important elements in loving our neighbor. It's impossible to love someone if you're not aware of them. It's impossible to love someone if you're not engaged with them. It's impossible to really love someone without being present with them. Presence matters. Presence is how God's cosmic plan connects to the neighborhood.

God is omnipresent. In every space, every situation, every encounter, every relationship, God is present.

This is an encouraging and challenging reality, but I would argue that the most powerful and most provocative way God is present in those circumstances is in you. If you know Jesus -- if he is alive and at work in you -- then wherever you are and wherever you go God is present in you. Think about this at work, the gym, your kids' softball practice, at home, walking the neighborhood, sitting at the playground, at the grocery store, at the coffee shop... GOD IS THERE with you because GOD IS PRESENT IN YOU.

It's important to really understand this. Everywhere you are, God is there, because you are carrying around the presence of God in you.

Of course, this only matters if you are fully present in whatever circumstance you find yourself in.

That's the key to a good theology of presence. It's not just that we are aware of the presence of God at work in our lives. We must be fully aware of our present situation and we must be fully present there. You see, God's presence in you, plus your presence with those you're living life next to makes neighboring a spiritual act.

Think about that for a second.

How you interact with your coworkers - it's spiritual

How you engage with the people you cross paths with everyday - it's spiritual

How you connect with the people that live next door - it's spiritual

The way you engage with those you randomly encounter -- it's all spiritual

A good theology of presence actually makes every thing you do every single day, supernatural.

GOD MODELS PRESENCE FOR US

What does neighboring as a spiritual act look like?

The best place to start is to understand how God's been present with humanity throughout time. That means we need to start by looking at how God was present in the beginning of it all.

Throughout history there have been many explanations of how humanity came into existence. In ancient times many believed we were the result of a cosmic battle, and humanity was the remains of the gods that lost the war, hated by the gods that remained because we reminded them of their enemies. More recently people have speculated that we are here by chance or that maybe our existence had no relation to any higher power, but the author of Genesis tells us that humans were made by God in His own image.

And furthermore, that when God finished creating humanity He looked at everything He made and said that it was good.

From the beginning, God has been FOR humanity.

If you keep reading through the story we have in the Bible you'll find many places where God advances his connection with humanity. He builds deep, notable relationships with men like Noah, Abraham and Moses. But at one point, God tells the Israelites to build a tabernacle. The tabernacle is essentially a mobile temple. God's reason for having the Israelites build the tabernacle wasn't just so they would have a place to worship. God asks them to build the tabernacle so that His presence can dwell there with the people.

It wasn't enough for the God of the universe to be FOR humanity. God himself wanted to be WITH humanity. He wanted his presence to be seen and felt. He wanted humanity to encounter Him in a physical way, and so he was WITH them.

God's presence WITH these people had tremendous effects on their lives. Think about how powerful and encouraging it would be to know that the God of the universe was WITH you on a regular basis. As powerful as this must have been, it became evident that humanity needed more. Often they would turn their backs on God, even though he was WITH them. They would lose their way and do things the way they wanted rather than the way God wanted, hurting themselves and those around them.

God decided to advance the relationship even further. Instead of just being FOR humanity or even WITH them, He took the next step and became ONE OF them. In Jesus we see God entering the world -- not just as God, but as 100% man as well. In The Message, Eugene Peterson puts it this way: "The God of the universe put on flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

Jesus lived on this earth for thirty-three years, connecting humanity back to God. Then he died for our sins and rose again so that we may have new life, if you believe in Him he now lives IN you, too. Wherever you go, the God of the universe goes there with you, because God is present IN you.

FOR, WITH, ONE OF, IN

Think about what these words tell us about the nature of God. People wonder what God is like, or how God feels about them, but if you read the story you know not just that God is love but that God loves you. No matter what humanity was or is doing, this story tells us that God is always moving toward us.

Here's the most important thing for us to understand. The only way people you are living life next to - your friends, your coworkers, your classmates, your neighbors -- will know how God feels about them is if you learn to be fully present in the places where your lives intersect.

How do you do that?

What if we follow God's progression of presence on our own lives? That means we can start with just being FOR our neighbors.

It may seem like nothing to say "I'm FOR those I'm doing life next to," but it's easy to see how people might wonder. Have you ever had a neighbor who avoided you, never made eye contact, or wouldn't wave? Even without having any relationship - no conversation, no interaction, nothing - it's easy to just assume that those neighbors aren't FOR you and, in fact, they seem to be AGAINST you.

A few years ago I had a neighbor who scowled - a lot. This guy didn't want to talk with anyone and didn't want you anywhere near his house. One of our new neighbors was getting cable installed, and the line had to be run through this guy's back yard. Instead of saying something to our new neighbor, he just cut the cable and then posted signs at every corner of his property saying that this was private property. Everyone knew this guy

wasn't FOR anyone even though he had never personally interacted with any of us.

I wonder what your presence in the neighborhood and with those you cross paths with tells people about whether or not you're FOR them.

Start by doing simple things like smiling or waving. If you want, to get crazy, try to meet a few of your neighbors. When you see people walking by, say hello. It really isn't much, but these simple acts let those around you know that you are FOR them.

What's interesting is that we can find plenty of opportunities to be WITH people, once they have the impression that we're FOR them. Conversations begin, and to be WITH someone you'll need to listen, and let them know you're really listening. Be honest and transparent about who you really are and the things you care about. If you're really WITH someone relationally, you'll be intentional about being WITH them physically, so you'll need to be intentional about hanging out on purpose and not just by chance.

You know those friends that feel more like family than they do friends? How do you think that happens? It's not something that happens automatically. It takes time to develop, but when it does there's no doubt that they are in it WITH, you because you are connected in a way that goes past circumstances and surroundings. You are connected on a heart level. With family members you are ONE OF a genetic bloodline. You are connected biologically. But when a friend becomes ONE OF it's a choice!

If you're going to follow Jesus in this neighboring adventure it means you're going to have to make the same choice he did. I may have made it sound more serious than it will feel when you're in the middle of neighboring, but all I'm really talking about is becoming friends. This is pretty important for those of us who want our neighbors to connect back to God. What we see in Jesus is someone who became ONE OF, which really meant he treated people as equals. He did this because - and it's important that we get this - Jesus was just like them.

If you want to love your neighbor, you're going to have to believe that you're just like them. That's easy to do when our friends and neighbors seem to think a lot like us, but becoming ONE OF with people who think, act, believe or behave differently than we do can be hard. And let's just be honest -- this is only hard for us because we are naturally inclined to think of ourselves as better than those who are different from us.

Doesn't that make the fact that Jesus became ONE OF us even more remarkable? He actually was better than us, and yet he still treated all those he came in contact with as his equals.

This is especially important for us if our long-term understanding is that Jesus has sent us to the places we live, work, and play to be missionaries to the people we intersect with. Our hope is that they would give their hearts to Jesus, but that shouldn't change how we become ONE OF them.

As Pastor Eugene Cho says, "Your neighbors don't want you to see them as a target group. I mean, who does? They want you to be a good neighbor." The best neighbors are those who are ONE OF the community. When our lives become interconnected, we share each other's burdens and we take care of each other. We're there no matter what.

The good news is that it's God who brings someone to faith in him, but he sends us to love our neighbors so that they have a chance to see him IN us. Honestly, this is the only reason I believe you and I can do what Jesus has sent us to do - FOR, WITH, ONE OF - you can do this because Christ is IN you.

God's presence in you plus your presence with those you're living alongside makes neighboring a spiritual act. Your presence is where God's cosmic plan meets your neighborhood. That's how important where you go, what you do and how you live is. It should make you ask, "What kind of difference is God's presence in me and my presence with the people I'm living life with making in their lives?" Maybe they'll feel loved or cared for. Maybe they'll

find connection or community. Maybe your presence will let them know how God really feels about them.

So wherever you go, day in and day out, remember that the God of the universe goes there with you. He's living IN you and if you're fully present he will move in you for his purposes with the people you're living life next to if you will just be fully present with them.

TRY NEIGHBORING



INDIVIDUAL

- Draw a map with your house in the middle, and learn the names of the people in all the houses near yours.
- Find out what your neighbors do professionally.
- Find a way to get to know one personal thing about each neighbor.
- Look for ways to “help” when you see neighbors doing a project.
- Make a goal to talk with one neighbor each day, and do it.

FAMILY

- Bake cookies and take them to each house.
- Invite families over for seasonal parties (school’s out, Valentine’s Day, Christmas).
- Look for ways to rally other families around you to serve your community together.
- Play out front instead of in the back, to intentionally engage with neighbors.
- Make a goal for the number of times a month your family will invite neighbors over.

GROUP

- Share your neighbor’s names and needs and pray for them with the group.
- Invite group members over along with neighbors, to connect important relationships.
- Work together on seasonal parties to create special experiences with shared resources.
- Share stories of successes and failures in loving your neighbor, to learn from each other.
- Ask meaningful questions of each other, to encourage regular engagement with neighbors.



EMPOWER

THE HEBREW WORD FOR “BLESSING” (BARAK) MEANS “TO EMPOWER TO STRENGTH”. WE SEEK TO PASS GOD’S BLESSING ON TO OTHERS THROUGH WORDS OF AFFIRMATION, ACTS OF KINDNESS AND TANGIBLE GIFTS.

PRACTICE

I will bless three people this week - at least one of whom is a non-Christian.

THE POWER OF A SMALL DEED

Curtis Carnes

Have you ever felt crushed in spirit? Difficult things seem to happen one after the other. Your relationship with your spouse may have plateaued. Your connection with God seems distant. You may not have enough money to pay your rent this month. You're suffering from a health issue. You are still looking for your soulmate. Some situation, some issue, or some relationship has you sad and disappointed. You feel stuck, you can't move forward, and you wonder if it's always going to be like this. We've all experienced times like this, when life just seems stagnant. We lack energy and excitement, and feel weak.

But then someone shares a word of encouragement. You receive a gift in the mail to help you get through the month. A friend shares a verse that reignites your faith. Someone takes time out of their day to be with you and truly listen. Your spouse makes a move toward you to better your relationship. Someone prays over you and you begin to feel better. Someone tells you about a job opportunity. Essentially, someone does something that lifts your spirit and re-energizes you. It may have been a small thing for them, but it meant the world to you, and you're strengthened for the journey ahead.

If this has ever happened to you, and I am sure it has, then you know exactly how it feels to be empowered. The word Empower from the Hebrew word for "blessing" (barak) means "to empower to strength." As powerful as it was when someone took time out of their day to empower you, you have the opportunity to have that same impact on others.

This rhythm seeks to pass God's blessing on to others through words of affirmation, acts of kindness and tangible gifts. I encourage you to do this with three people a week, and sit back and see what God does. It can be big or small acts: Offering encouragement by saying things others wouldn't;

giving gifts that others wouldn't; serving someone by doing things others wouldn't.

Empowering others is more than just doing good deeds. It's more than just random acts of kindness. It's more than being nice or being friendly. This is about real BLESSING: empowering to strength. Real strength comes only from people encountering Jesus. The Rhythm of Empower gives you the opportunity to do tangible acts that cause others to encounter Jesus. This is where the real power of seemingly small acts comes from.

SEE LIKE JESUS, BE LIKE JESUS

Yet these seemingly small acts are surprisingly hard for us to do. Many things keep us from doing them: time, energy, perceived resources, etc. But there are two big things that keep us from empowering others: our lack of awareness, and our lack of courage. What we often lack, Jesus had in spades. We see Jesus' awareness and courage when he heals someone who couldn't walk in Mark 2:3-11 ESV:

*And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. ⁵And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."
⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷"Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? ¹⁰But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—
¹¹"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." ¹²And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"*

Jesus' awareness was off the charts. He had the ability to see past the surface, recognize what people truly needed, and give it to them. We see it here with the paralytic. Jesus recognizes exactly what he needed and gave it to him. Although his body was broken, he noticed a deeper need. His need for forgiveness. Jesus was able to see through the surface and empower someone with what he or she needed. And it was not always forgiveness. Sometimes Jesus gave food, sometimes water, sometimes a fresh word of encouragement, or sometimes a challenge. Jesus had the awareness to empower people with exactly what they needed at the time.

We need to have the same awareness to empower others. And we can! The Bible says that we have the mind of Christ, and His Spirit living inside us. This means we have the potential to operate with this same level of awareness Jesus did. Two things need to happen to operate at this level of awareness: Less of us and more of Him.

First, we have to think of ourselves less. This is hard. We naturally are self-focused people. We are thinking about what we have to work on, who we need to meet with, or what's going on for us. Instead we need to start thinking of others. How is this person doing? What are some needs that this person or family is dealing with? What could I do to empower this person right now?

Second, we have to open our ears and hearts to how Jesus would have us empower others. God knows what others need. We can access that information because His Spirit lives within us. Begin to listen to God as you interact with others. Ask Him what the real need is with this person. As you feel a nudge to do this or that, take the step of faith to empower that person. However, this takes courage.

JUST DO IT

Not only did Jesus have the innate ability to know what people needed, he had the courage to give it to them. In the Mark passage above, Jesus knew people were thinking negatively about what he might do, but he did it anyway. He had courage! Maybe you have a fresh word from God for

someone, but you don't know the person very well, or you're afraid they may be weirded out by you approaching them with something like this. Maybe God is calling you to give a gift to someone, but you aren't sure how they will receive it. Maybe God is calling you to serve someone, but you wonder what your family or friends will think. It takes courage to overcome these pressures. It's one thing to think of a way to empower someone, it's quite another to actually empower that person. You have to push through what others may think of you, how you may be received, the time and effort it takes, the cost it requires, second-guessing, all sorts of things. But your seemingly small acts of courage mean that others will encounter God in BIG ways. And that's worth fighting through whatever may be holding you back.

We come across people we can empower all the time. But do we have the awareness to see it and the courage to do it? I encourage you to begin to asking God for a greater awareness into the needs of others and the courage to follow through. The Empower rhythm asks you to bless three people this week - at least one of whom is a non-Christian. This is a great place to start. Once you get a taste of the power of this rhythm, you might find yourself doing it more often!

TRY EMPOWER



INDIVIDUAL

- Speak an encouraging word with someone who may feel down.
- Shovel your neighbor's driveway or mow their lawn.
- Share a word from the Lord to someone when you feel led.
- Give someone a gift you know they will appreciate.
- Help a family in need with a bill.

FAMILY

- Make a get well soon card with your kids for someone who is sick.
- Help a senior with some yard work as a family.
- Serve together at a homeless shelter.
- Pray together about who God wants your family to bless and then do what He directs you to do. Be especially open to your kids' ideas.
- Find a way to sacrifice something your family would normally do and use the resources to bless another family.

GROUP

- Pool your money together to help out with a major need.
- Provide meals for a family with a new baby.
- Serve a specific group you are called to care for.
- Pray together and discern who and how God would want you to bless someone.
- Take time to speak encouraging words to each other at a group gathering.



WAIT

WE BELIEVE THAT GOD WANTS TO SPEAK TO US, AND WE BELIEVE THAT WE ARE CAPABLE OF LISTENING. WE DO NOT CONFINE HIM TO ANY PARTICULAR MEDIUM, BUT WE ACTIVELY WAIT FOR HIS VOICE WHEREVER AND WHENEVER HE SPEAKS.

PRACTICE

I will spend one hour this week listening to the Holy Spirit's voice.

WAIT

Andy Sikora

LEARNING TO PRAY

At our house, we're working hard to teach our kids about following Jesus without making it into a rigid religious expectation. We want to develop in our kids a thirst and a desire for the things of God, so we read the Bible together, talk to them about what they're learning in their classes at church, and pray together before bed, at meals and whenever a need arises.

Our oldest daughter, Kenzie, went to a Christian pre-school and learned a prayer they sang before snack every day. Once she memorized it, she was excited to teach it to us, so started singing that prayer before every meal we ate together. We've sung that prayer hundreds of times, to the point that it's become our youngest daughter Eva's favorite way to pray. Before a meal I'll say, "Ok, who's praying?" Without fail Eva always volunteers to lead us in the song.

One night, exasperated by the prospect of singing that song one more time, I said, "How about tonight, instead of singing our prayer, you pray something else. Try telling God thank you for something good that happened today." This method of prayer is always a hit with my oldest daughter so I was sure that Eva would like it too. Boy, was I wrong.

Eva looked at me and burst into tears. Through her tears she managed to blubber, "But I don't even know how to pray!" It didn't get better after she calmed down, either. Not only did she not want to pray the little prayer of thanksgiving I suggested, now she didn't even want to sing her favorite prayer.

I wonder if you've ever felt that way about praying. Have you ever felt like you didn't know how to pray, or maybe you didn't know how to pray in a

certain situation? Maybe you had a frustrating or embarrassing experience, and now praying seems impossible. If you have, you're not alone! Plenty of people have found themselves in the same spot at various times throughout their lives.

You might be surprised to learn that even Jesus' disciples felt this way. Think about the famous scene from Luke 11. These disciples are with Jesus constantly. They've followed him, they've watched his life, they've seen him pray with people and for people. They know that Jesus gets up early before anyone else and goes off to secluded places to connect with God the Father in prayer. One day after Jesus had finished praying one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray."

It's important that you get this. These men were very religious. They had prayed their whole lives and yet there was something about the quality and the quantity of Jesus' praying that caused them to see how little they knew about prayer. Here's what's remarkable about this scene: Jesus wasn't upset with them that they didn't know how to pray like he prayed, instead he helped them learn how to pray.

Prayer is a learned practice. It was for the disciples and it can be for you too.

It seems that the way Jesus believes we'll learn how to pray, is by praying. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how, he didn't teach them a class on prayer, instead

He said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. ³Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation. - Luke 11.2-4 NIV

Prayer is a learned practice and we learn it by doing it.

Before we get too far into this, let's evaluate what makes prayer so important. Many of us do not pray because we do not see the value in prayer. After all, most of us can accomplish a lot in our own power. You can do a million nice things for others all in your own power, but a lack of prayer reveals who we're really depending on.

Pastor Ronnie Floyd says, "If we do not pray we are depending on ourselves." Without a regular rhythm of prayer in your life, you are depending on yourself. For some of us, that's just what we want. Maybe you think you don't need God's help, or that you shouldn't bother God unless it's an emergency. Or you may feel that you've tried prayer in the past and didn't see God answer, and so you're better off depending on yourself. But if you've made it this far in the book, I'm assuming there is some part of you that wants to learn to wait on God.

There's good reason for that. Prayer is important for so many reasons. One of the main reasons is that prayer is the thing that makes this life we're living supernatural. Without prayer the things we do, even the good religious things we're doing connected to this rhythm, are just part of a larger spiritual checklist. Prayer connects our normal everyday activities to the power and the person of God. By praying, we acknowledge that we're not alone in this world -- that there's something bigger than you and me, and it's not just something -- it's someone, and we know him by name. Prayer is also the acknowledgement and declaration that God knows us personally, and wants to be known personally by us.

Think about that. Prayer is you and me speaking directly to the God who created everything, who holds it all together, and who is actively working to redeem, restore and renew this crazy creation! It may be surprising to you, but you're not the only one that wants this kind of connection. God wants it too!

There are countless passages throughout scripture that help us understand the value that God himself puts on prayer. Here are a few of them:

Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray continually, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. -
1 Thessalonians 5.16-18 NIV

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. - Philippians 4.6 NIV

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. -
1 Peter 5.7 NIV

You do not have because you do not ask God. ³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. - James 4.2b - 3 NIV

Prayer is a transformative act. When we take time to connect with God himself in a personal way, God will transform us. He'll transform us from our sinful nature, toward his nature.

Richard Foster writes in Celebration of Discipline, "To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us... In prayer, real prayer, we begin to think God's thoughts after him; to desire the things he desires, to love the things he loves, to will the things he wills. Progressively, we are taught to see things from his point of view."

It's so clear that God wants us to pray. He desires us to reach out to him, to cast our cares on him, to share our hearts with him, to ask him to provide. And not only that -- God uses prayer to help shape us into who he's made us to be. So if this is what God wants for us and from us, and if prayer is a learned activity, the only thing left to do is pray.

Before we do though, let me ask you a few questions.

- Would you like to be more personally connected to God?

- Would you like to be more connected to His mission for your life?
- Would you like to understand and do His will more regularly?

If you've answered yes to these questions, you need to have a regular rhythm of prayer in your life.

WAITING IS THE HARDEST PART

One of the great philosophers of our day has said, "The waiting is the hardest part." Ok, so it was Tom Petty and you may not think of him as much of a philosopher, but he's right, isn't he? Waiting for anything is hard. Waiting to eat when you're hungry, waiting for a friend to call, waiting for your vacation to begin, waiting to open those presents until Christmas, waiting for your loved one to be ready to go. The waiting is the hardest part!

The question is, what makes waiting so hard? For most of us the waiting is difficult because in waiting we're surrendering control of our circumstances. We're quite literally submitting ourselves to someone or something else, essentially stating that we are willing to let that person or thing determine the outcome for us. This is hard.

In some circumstances, like when waiting for a meal, a gift or vacation, we can be quite sure that the wait will be worth it and our patience will be rewarded. But there are plenty of times when waiting is difficult precisely because we don't know what the outcome will be. If you've interviewed for a job, or you've recently had important medical tests, or if you've had a difficult conversation with a friend who has asked for some time to process what you've said, the process of waiting can be excruciating because you're uncertain what the outcome will be, and it is truly out of your hands.

Prayer really is waiting. Most of us wouldn't want to admit it, but what makes waiting hard is the same thing that makes prayer hard for so many of us. In prayer, we are really "waiting" on God. It's a conscious effort to let God determine the outcome for us, and to do that we have to accept that some things are out of our hands; they rest in the hands of God. In Christian circles we'll celebrate how great it is to leave things in God's hands -- and it is,

because he is God -- but we often ignore how the waiting is the hardest part, even when it's God we're waiting on.

Waiting on God can take many different forms. You may be waiting for God to direct your next steps in big or small things. You may be waiting to see how God may answer one of your biggest prayers. You could be waiting to hear God speak to you about a specific issue, or to offer you comfort, or challenge, or encouragement. Your relationship with God is crucial and learning to wait, to seek him in prayer, to make space so that he can speak to you, is one of the most important things we can learn to do.

It's very important for us to understand that prayer is a conversation. We are not just to make our requests known to God, but we really believe that God can and will speak to us. He can use everything to speak to us because wherever we are, He is there with us. As believers in Jesus, we have the Holy Spirit living in us, and the Holy Spirit will speak to our hearts in many different ways. He will absolutely bring out important things you need to know or pay attention to while you're reading the Bible or listening to a sermon, but the Holy Spirit is not limited to what we would generally call "spiritual disciplines." I have sensed God speaking to me in conversations with friends, while running through a park, reading both fiction and non-fiction books that weren't written by people who even believed in God, watching movies and even listening to songs by Eminem (gasp!).

The real questions are "Are you listening?" and "Are you willing to wait on God?" If you do, He will speak!

PRAYER METHODS AND RESOURCES

Here are a few prayer methods to try, as you work to connect with God each week while practicing the Rhythm of Renewal.

ACTS PRAYER METHOD

Adoration - Take time to celebrate God for who He is - not what He's done.

Confession - If there is sin in your life - confess that. 1 John 1.9 says God will forgive and purify us.

Thanksgiving - Thank God for the good things in your life. James says every good gift comes from God, so thank Him.

Supplication - Make your requests known to God.

THE IGNATIAN EXAMEN

1. Become aware of God's presence. Ask God to help you focus on His ways. It may take a minute, or 10, to slow down, and ask God to lead, guide and speak.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions as you walk through the day. Reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day, then ask what is God saying to you about these emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it. This could be the emotions we talked about, or it may be prayer about something for your kids or spouse, a challenge you're facing, or neighbor you're trying to love
5. Look toward tomorrow. What is coming that you want God's help and hand at work in?

SOAP METHOD

Scripture :: Read through a passage of scripture.

Observation :: What is this passage saying? Paraphrase it in your own words.

Application :: How does this passage apply to my life? What must I do because of what I've learned?

Prayer :: Pray through what God has shown you in the passage.

BREATH PRAYER

1. Breathe in and address God using an attribute and name. Example: Oh Merciful Father. Oh Gracious Lord.
2. Breathe out and make a request. Example: Give me love for my family. Bring me through this trial.
3. Practice this prayer for 5-10 minutes at a time.

GOOD BOOKS ON PRAYER TO FURTHER YOUR GROWTH

Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God by Dr. Tim Keller

Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home by Richard Foster

TRY WAIT



INDIVIDUAL

- Write out your prayers in a prayer journal.
- Take 15 minutes a day to be quiet with God and listen.
- Meditate on a certain Scripture and ask God to direct your heart in response to it.
- At night, reflect on the day's activities and ask, "Where was God working and speaking?"
- Multiple times each day, ask God to speak to you. Then, pay attention for what He may say.

FAMILY

- Create a time where prayer becomes a common daily practice for your family.
- Ask each other regularly, "What's God saying to you?" to help build the expectation that you will hear Him.
- Use various prayer methods to give your family different experiences.
- When prompted in public/social situations, lead your family in prayer.
- When someone in your family is sick or anxious, invite the whole family to pray for that person.

GROUP

- Share with your group what God's been saying to you, and its impact.
- Take a group meeting to pray together. Invite someone who is experienced in leading prayer meetings to direct your time together.
- Regularly ask each other, "What's God saying to you?"
- When someone expresses need, fear or sickness, lay hands on them and pray.
- Go to members' schools, workplaces and neighborhoods and pray for God's movement there.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Curtis Carnes

A few years back, my friend Nate set an audacious goal: To encourage at least one person each day for a full year, whether in person or via email or text. Initially I doubted whether he could really stick to it, but his stories proved otherwise. Weak family relationships were strengthened. People were encouraged when they had felt hopeless. His words were empowering people and changing lives!

Nate's year-long challenge emboldened him to reach out to a friend he'd let down in the past. Years earlier, his friend told Nate that he was gay. Nate's response to his friend's admission brought a distance to the relationship. During his year of encouragement, Nate felt called to encourage this friend. He wrote him an email -- half confession, half encouragement -- and sent it off. Several weeks later Nate received a reply. His friend poured out his heart to Nate, expressing how much Nate's email meant to him. Nate's initial email turned into back and forth correspondence full of encouragement and hope. This restoration of a friendship came about because Nate decided that he wanted encouragement to be a daily rhythm in his life.

At the end of the year, I asked Nate what he learned from his year-long journey of encouragement. He said, "I don't even have to think about encouraging people anymore. It's who I am! It just naturally bubbles up inside of me and comes out." By making a daily effort to encourage others, Nate was changed.

Here's what we learn from his story: A rhythm can change you! It can make you into the person you want to be. Something that starts as a commitment to a new way of living can become your way of life! This is the invitation of the Rhythm of Renewal.

THE RHYTHM OF RENEWAL

RENEW COMMUNITIES

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