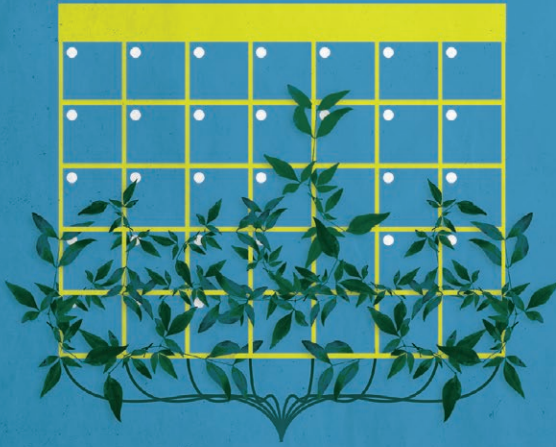


JUSTIN WHITMEL EARLEY

THE
COMMON
RULE



HABITS OF
PURPOSE
FOR AN AGE OF
DISTRACTION

Taken from *The Common Rule* by Justin Whitmel Earley.
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KNEELING PRAYER AT MORNING, MIDDAY, AND BEDTIME

*“Your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.”*

JESUS (MATTHEW 6:10)

Ora et labora. Work and pray.

MOTTO OF THE BENEDICTINE MONKS

BEING A CORPORATE LAWYER

When people ask me what I do and I don’t want to talk about it, I say, “I am a corporate lawyer.” I get the feeling they imagine me in some downtown office in a suit doing legal things they don’t want to hear about.

It’s true that I work in a downtown office in a suit, doing legal things you don’t want to hear about—sometimes. But there is much more life in it than that.

So when people ask me what I do, *and I do want to talk about it*, I say, “I change things with words.” This is as equally true as the first statement, but it always leads to a follow-up question: “What do you mean?”

Here is what I mean. When two companies have a deal they want to make—suppose one wants to buy the other—we turn the hope into a concrete reality with words. We move negotiations by choosing the most convincing words, we minimize risk by making sure a contract has all the right words, and at the closing of the

deal we create a new reality by actually saying these words out loud: “Ladies and gentlemen, we are closed. Congratulations.”

If you think about it, it’s amazing. One moment there was no merger, and the next there is—simply because of words. Words create new realities. Small words have enormous impact.

As I look back on my career, it sometimes looks strange. I have at times been some combination of a missionary, a writer, and a lawyer. But when I think about words, it all makes sense. Mine has been a life of words. I’ve been in the business of words, trying to convince the world that there is truth, there is beauty, there is order. This has always been my vocation.

Understanding the power of small words is central to understanding the significance of daily prayer. We all desire to somehow shape our chaotic days into lives with meaning. *That begins with punctuating our days with words: the words of prayer.* I believe in the power of words—and especially words of prayer—to shape the world.

A WORLD MADE OF WORDS

The world began with words.

At first the majestic power of the voice of God spoke light into existence. Then came planets, plasmas, penguins, pineapples, and polar ice caps. When God speaks, the world takes shape.

Words bring order to chaos and form to the formless. But the power of words doesn’t stop with God; their power passes to his image bearers—to us.

One of the most fascinating moments of the whole creation narrative is the moment when God handed the power of words to humans. God spent days moving in and out of a divine rhythm of creation and rest, speaking the world into existence and then sitting back to say, “Good! Very good!” And how did God make it all? By words.

Then God turns to humans and says, “Your turn,” or, more formally, “Be fruitful and multiply.” How did he pass on the task to us? By words. How are we to begin this task? Of course, by words. Adam’s first job was to come alongside God and name the world. As the first poet—and zoologist—God invited Adam to work with him in speaking order into the world by the power of words.

So then, here we are at the beginning of a day. If we’re to make something of the world, we must begin with words. Just as God framed the world in love, so we can use the words of prayer to frame each part of our day in love.

FRAMING THE MORNING IN LOVE OR LEGALISM

Every day of my life, I have woken with a kind of prayer. Depending on my stage of life, however, my prayers have been of radically different kinds.

In high school, it was, “Oh why, oh why, does first period start so early?” Or maybe “Please don’t let anyone find out what happened last night.”

In college, my prayers became inarticulate groans. Something like, “Oh please let it not matter that I’m missing that class.”

In my recent life, these have made up my Book of Common Groans.

- I really should have gone to bed earlier.
- I really should have woken earlier.
- What the [insert choice explicative] are the boys doing up so early?
- Why am I always so tired?
- I seriously—*seriously* this time—have got to get that project done today.
- I shouldn’t have watched that.

This is all to say that for my whole life, my day has begun with a profound sense of wishing something was different. Usually it

revolves around what I've done or what I need to do. In this way, every day begins in a sort of prayer, no matter how inarticulate.

When I wake up thinking of what I've done, I often feel guilt over the day before. When I wake up thinking about what I need to do, I often feel anxiety over the day to come. Notice that in all these cases, my sense of things hangs on my performance. For most of my life, I've been framing the day with a sense of what you may call legalism.

Legalism is the belief that the world hangs on what I do and that God and people love me based on how I perform. This is an important concept because it's the exact opposite of the gospel: God loves us not because of *what we do*, but rather *in spite of what we do*—in spite of our good deeds and our bad deeds. Legalism takes the unmerited love of God and bends it into something earned—and just like that, the world is about us and not about him.

Legalism seems to be the default setting for human beings. So we will always wake up to some kind of prayer that makes the world about *us*—unless we create new habits of gospel prayers. These are prayers that make the world less about us and more about the love of God *for* us. Before I get to examples of these prayers, permit me a brief digression on prayer.

TWO KINDS OF PRAYER

The first kind of prayer names a reality that is. Like Adam's work of words in the Garden of Eden, it creates categories of meaning and names realities. This part of prayer is essential as it reminds us there are truths of the world: *God is good. We are loved. To be alive is beautiful. Gratitude is the way of happiness.* In this sense, prayer agrees with what God has created and reminds us of the way the world is.

The second kind of prayer is not simply naming what is but creating what can be. Just as God spoke mountains and soil into existence, so we use the words of prayer as a generative act of wishing new realities into existence. Often this work of prayer happens in the places where the order of creation has been broken: *Lord, have mercy! May your kingdom come. Please help! Or, Hold this widow as she grieves her husband's death.*

But not always. It may be *Lord, bless my children. May my neighbor know she is loved. Or, Guide my work today.*

The essence of all these prayers is to stand alongside God and speak order and love into a world that needs it. But our default morning prayers are usually broken versions of one of these two. We name false realities, or we create ones that shouldn't be.

ELECTRONIC PRAYERS

While I've been practicing some version of morning prayers my whole life, they radically changed when I got a smartphone. My smartphone exacerbates my tendency toward self-centered or legalistic morning prayers. Why? Because, of course, my phone is the portal through which the chaos of the world reaches my half-asleep heart through the pesky thing we call "notifications." This inevitably begins my day with all that I need to do and all that I've failed to do.

Our phones—and their programmers—are happy to set our habits for us. They would love to speak the first words of the day, and they usually do. Our phones—and whatever has come through them—thus shape the first desires of the morning and order our first prayers for us.

Before I banished notifications—emotionally prepare yourself now, for I will subsequently be recommending you do the same—I would wake to the prayers someone else wanted me to pray. If it was an early-morning work email with a task for me, I would begin

the day wishing it could be done or that I could avoid it. If it was a news alert about some elected official doing something abominable, I would begin the day wishing people could just have some common sense like I did. If it was a social media alert, I would begin the day wishing my life happened in a tinted, square frame.

Each of these nudges invited prayers of their own, usually prayers that framed the day in stress, envy, or cynicism—and they are all the more powerful because they are done by unconscious habit.

KEYSTONE HABITS AND KNEELING PRAYERS

Habits are something we do over and over without thinking about them. They shape our world effortlessly. They form us more than we form them—and that's why they are so powerful.

A keystone habit is a super-habit. It's the first domino in the line; by changing one habit, we simultaneously change ten other habits.

Beginning the day in kneeling prayer is such a keystone habit. In morning prayer, we frame the first words of the day in God's love for us, which is to say we uproot the weeds of legalism that grow if we simply do nothing, and we lay the first piece of the day's trellis on which love can grow.

It took a terrible anxiety collapse to get me to think closely about what was happening in my heart each morning. I examined those moments, and I found that I was by default beginning the day by speaking the words of my pride or fear into each day. Framing the day in terms of me was effortless.

I wanted to change that, but changing habits of the mind is immensely tricky. Thoughts are slippery things. We can't grab them. Actually, we can't even touch them, and they often happen before we know it. Hence their power. They are the unnoticeable emotional water we swim in that ends up shaping everything.

For me, the first step in changing such thought habits was the discovery of the automatic “do not disturb” function on my phone. (Often reprogramming our phones is a way to reprogram our thought life, which goes to show how non-neutral our phones are.) Setting my phone to automatically go to “do not disturb” at 11 p.m. and stay set until 8 a.m. means that my family and other select contacts can call me if they need to. Anyone else who calls twice in an emergency will come through too. (Yes, that is sometimes work calls.) But otherwise it is silent.

This removed a thousand legalistic nudges during my morning, but alone it was not enough. That was only clearing the rubble.

The second step was to kneel. Often one of the only ways to take hold of the mind is to take hold of the body. As I kneeled, my sleepy mind was shocked into a new kind of moment. It wondered what was going on. *What are we doing down here on the cold floor?* (If you struggle with getting out of bed on time, this helps by hurting. Mild pain is a great way to stop snoozing. Fair warning.)

Now that the rubble is cleared out and the usual habits of the morning mind are disrupted, here we do what we were created to do. Like God, we speak words of love into the world.

Most days this is very, very short. When I wake exhausted or to a crying baby, often my first moment on my knees by the bed is very quick, a “Lord, have mercy.” When I wake thinking about that big meeting or the project that needs way more hours than the day has, it’s a slower pause for help: “Lord, I dreamt about this all night. I’m worried. Help me be like you and do good work that brings order to chaos.” On those rare, glorious days when I wake rested, in disbelief that I got enough sleep and I have an hour before the kids wake up, it may be “Lord, I can’t believe it! This is amazing! Thank you for your care for me! Let me love others today like you love me.”

Here we recover the two uses of prayer, naming true realities: “God, thank you for another day I did not earn. You are so generous to me.” And we are creating true realities: “Let me make something good of the world today. Let me love the world and all the people in it just like you love it.”

In the smallest shift, the whole day has been reframed. Now it’s time to get to work.

FRAMING OUR WORK IN LOVE

I have a kind of bipolar relationship with work. To this day I can’t tell whether I’m fundamentally hedonistic or fundamentally a workaholic. Perhaps this is normal (but more likely it isn’t). In any case, work is the place where I realize how much I am made to be like God and, at the very same time, how much I am not God. Because of this, meaningful work—even on the good days—is guaranteed to destabilize the day. This is why we need midday prayer to reframe the day in love.

Permit one last digression here. In order to understand why praying at work is important, we have to know what work is for.

To work is to be like God. This is because no matter what our profession is, work is where we make something of the world. To see why this is so Godlike, we have to return to the beginning again.

Go back to the opening act of the Bible. The spotlight has just come on, and we find the Trinity on the stage, working together to create this beautiful and bizarre material world. God is different parts blue-collar worker, artist, inventor, tinkerer, gardener, and entrepreneur, in all cases working with his hands, getting dirty, and calling this creative act good.

The Hebrew word that God says over and over is *tov*, which is something more than just *good*. It is something like *wow* or

whoa—like the involuntary noise a stadium crowd makes when an athlete does something sudden and spectacular. *Tov* is the benediction God speaks over his creation, and if we miss that, we miss the fundamental truth that God is caught up in his love of matter and being and creation. In some way, we have to envision God like Jackson Pollock, the modern artist famous for throwing paint. God is slinging materials around, throwing paint at walls to see what sticks, and saying, “Wow! *Tov!* *Tov!* *Tov!*”

God’s work is love. He loves the world into being. He sings it into existence, and he is enamored with the world he has made.

We can’t understand what we’re doing at work until we see that all of our professions are born out of the good work of God. Artists and inventors, like God, create things. That’s *tov*. Lawyers and accountants name realities, bring order to chaos. That’s *tov*. Builders make things that didn’t used to exist, and plumbers fix things that are broken. They are both *tov*. Investors and entrepreneurs make things fruitful and multiply. It’s all *tov*.

To work is to not be like God. Though all of our work is derivative of God’s work; at the same time, we are so *unlike* God in our work. God speaks, and codes of DNA are ordered. God says the word, and magnetic poles tilt to their true north.

When we speak, it’s much less majestic. Employees get offended, tasks get confused, and inboxes get clogged with useless new initiatives. We would like to say, “Let there be a third-quarter report!” But work is the place where we discover that anything worth doing seems almost impossible to do. Just today I was sending an email to someone requesting a deadline, knowing full well there was no way this person was going to honor my deadline. It’s impossibly frustrating to know you’re speaking meaningless words. Just ask a parent—it’s exhausting and discouraging to waste words. We’d all rather have ultimate power.

In general, we aren't content to be like God; we want to *be* God. And this is the cause of so much self-centeredness in work. Work becomes about proving that we can accomplish something, that we are worth our salt, and that our voices are worth listening to—even if we have to bang the table or send a snarky told-you-so email.

So we invert the purpose of work. Instead of working as a way to love and serve others, we turn work into a way to be loved and served by others. Instead of longing to hear the “Tov!” of God, we work for the “Tov!” of people. And this is only the beginning of our brokenness; sometimes we actively labor to hurt people. Not only is the world complex and hard to manage, but evil abounds. Whether it's a competent bookkeeper working in the field of sex trafficking or an otherwise talented manager writing an email specifically intended to produce guilt and shame in an employee, often human work actively cultivates evil instead of love.

REFRAMING WORK IN LOVE

Kneeling prayer midday at work is a habit that reframes the workday in love because it resets the paradigm, often just when it's falling apart. I often begin the day in the office in a surge of energy and productivity. In the morning, tasks are clear. My to-do lists are organized. I have an (always unrealistic) sense that I'm going to accomplish everything that day. On the right cocktail of coffee, sheer willpower, and fear of failure, I can ride these plans for *at least* a couple of hours and sometimes even until noon.

But then the wheels begin to fall off. I usually notice this moment because I have the urge for still more coffee, even though I know it will give me the jitters. Or I have the urge to search the internet. For what? I don't know. I just want to search.

Somewhere between noon and two, I begin to realize that all the things I had hoped were going to get done are not going to

get done. I realize that somebody is going to have to be disappointed. I begin to look down the barrel of the afternoon, and I see that I'm not good enough. I can't do it. People don't listen to me, and all the feelings of legalism return: *If I can't hack it, what am I worth anyway?*

Kneeling prayer midday is a chance to acknowledge that inexorable tendency and to reframe the day right as it is falling apart. At this point in the day, I close my office door and kneel. This is inevitably awkward. What if someone walks in? It's uncomfortable. Suit pants weren't made for touching knees to the floor. But these are good discomforts. They remind me something is happening. If I'm working in a public place, I may just set my hands on my lap and turn them up. I need something physical to mark the moment for my slippery mind.

My short prayers for midday often have to do with a confession that I've made my work about me. Then, hoping to rewire that impulse, I pray for a client or a coworker. Sometimes I try to remember the way our products or services affect people I'll never meet. Sometimes I think about how they affect people who can't afford them. Sometimes I pray for the unemployed.

Sometimes I just sit in silence and look out the window.

No matter what I do, the habit always interrupts things in the best of ways. By introducing a new habit, there's a hook in each day, a place where the focus on self is snagged and disrupted. And I'm reminded that work is not for me but for someone else, so I can turn the rest of my workday toward that someone, whether a client, customer, employee, or stranger.

FRAMING THE EVENING IN LOVE

Finally we come to the end of the day, the tenuous moment when we must take our hands off the wheel and let things rest.

One of my pastor friends told me he gets genuinely sad every evening because there's always so much more he wants to do with the day. I'm like this. I suspect we're all something like this. The evening brings me face to face with the reality of my limited life. There's so much we wanted to do or at least that we felt we should do. What seemed so simple in the morning seems so foolish in the moonlight.

We never could have done it all. We could work all night and not have the house clean, not have the project ready, not have the presentation prepared. And the baby is going to cry all night anyway, or your roommate is going to snore all night, or you're going to wake up at three, unable to go back to sleep. Pick your life stage.

We're frustrated because we had no time for free time. Or we're embarrassed because we squandered it all on free time.

The evening, then, can be a time of severe self-judgment. I often find myself lying in bed and facing the reality that I spent the whole day trying to justify my existence on earth. I lie there and find the scary reality hanging from the ceiling like a bulb that won't turn off. *Does any of it matter?*

That's a worrisome thought, and because of it, I want to tune everything out. And many of us do. A drink sounds nice; two sounds better. Sex sounds good; porn is easier. A conversation would help; but binging on TV will let me tune out. Catching up on reading would be restful; Twitter has some notifications that are probably more urgent. Lauren and I should spend some time talking; talking is hard, and there's a podcast of a sermon that everyone said we should listen to. Oh, and an article is trending. There are more or less healthy ways to escape, *but what I can't escape is the desire to escape.*

The exhaustion of a day places us into a twilight where it isn't easy to make the right decisions. We're tired, and because our

bodies and our minds and our souls are all bound up together, we have trouble making choices. The business world calls it “decision fatigue.” My dad sums it up in classic dad advice: “Avoid making important decisions after the sun goes down.” The evening is a time of vulnerability. We haven’t spent the day so much as the day has spent us. When our exhaustion gives way to our addictions, we’re exposed for who we really are.

This is where an evening prayer can make one last and important turn in the day. Perhaps it’s once the work is done, the dishes are clean, or the kids are asleep that we pause to pray, to purposefully frame the evening in rest instead of letting it slip into something else. Or perhaps we take seriously the act of going to bed and asking, *How am I going to end this thing?* Shall we lie awake in bed, letting all the replay tapes run? Shall we browse our phones for some recent celebrity scandal to bounce meaninglessly around our brain? Or shall we walk intentionally toward the rest we know we need?

No one can sleep while believing that she needs to keep the world spinning. But real rest comes when we thank God that we don’t need to, because he does. Thus we kneel by the bed and place the period of God’s mercy and care for us at the end of the day.

You made it through another day. It doesn’t matter whether you feel spiritual or not. It doesn’t matter whether you know what to say or not. It doesn’t matter whether you’ve said the same thing every night for a month or not. It’s just habit.

You say your prayers until your prayers say you. That’s the goal.

BUILDING THE TRELIS OF HABIT

When I was young, my mom planted Carolina jasmine in the garden next to our brick garage. Jasmine is a beautiful plant, but it is also a twining vine plant. If not directed, its prolific shoots

spread toward all the other plants, overtaking and eventually killing them all.

My mom built a trellis next to the brick wall, directing the jasmine up and away from the other plants. After a few seasons, the yellow blossoms covered the whole wall. I still remember how that brick turned from something barren to something beautiful. I still remember the way the fragrance filled the backyard with the thick smell of spring.

Our lives are something like a jasmine plant, and our days and weeks are something like the trellis. At best, we're made to grow upward, blossom beautifully and fill the earth with all the rich fragrance of God's uncountable glories. Yet we are fallen. We are twisted. But that doesn't mean we don't grow; it means we grow sideways in ways we weren't meant to, often twisting into something that kills us and hurts those around us.

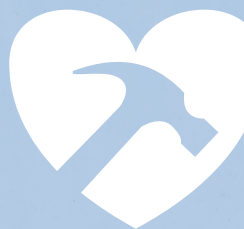
Should we do nothing, we will still grow. But we're likely to grow into habits that are destructive, not only to us but also to those around us.

Building the trellis of habit is a way to acknowledge the good ways God designed us as well as the ways the fall has broken us. It is a way to craft Annie Dillard's "net for catching days."¹ How else do we get our hands on time itself?

This begins with framing our days in love, and that begins with the words of prayer.

DAILY HABIT 1

KNEELING PRAYER AT MORNING, MIDDAY, AND BEDTIME



THE HABIT AT A GLANCE

The world is made of words. Even small, repeated words have power. Regular, carefully placed prayer is one of the keystone habits of spiritual formation, and is the beginning of building the trellis of habit. By framing our day in the words of prayer, we frame the day in love.

THREE WAYS TO START

Written prayers. You may want to begin by having a morning, midday, and evening prayer. Here are three you might use (these are available to print on the Common Rule website):

- *Morning.* Spirit, I was made for your presence. May this day be one I spend with you in all that I do. Amen.
- *Midday.* Jesus, I was made to join your work in the world. Please order the rest of my day in love for the people you have given me to serve. Amen.
- *Bedtime.* Father, I was made to rest in your love. May my body rest in sleep, and may my mind rest in your love. Amen.

Alarms and reminders. Once my friend Steve, after hearing a friend share for the fifth or sixth time how he wished he prayed with his wife, picked up the friend's phone and told Siri to set an alarm to remind him to pray with his wife. It was funny, but also common sense. Use alarms if you're having trouble beginning the rhythm. For a long time I had an alarm that went off at 1 p.m. each day at the office to remind me to stop and pray.

Praying with the body. Kneeling is a great way to mark the moment with physicality and humility. If kneeling is physically challenging or you are in public, try gently turning up your palms, setting them on your knees, or walking to a window.

THREE CONSIDERATIONS

Communal prayers. This habit often turns into a communal one. Some friends of mine who practice the Common Rule at their offices use this as a chance to take a break and pray briefly with a coworker. Usually they find an empty conference room and take a five-minute break together. My wife and I use evening prayer as a time to pray together before bed. Some mothers have told me they use the midday or evening prayer as a chance to pray with their children. Habitual, physical prayers are a great way to teach children the rhythms of constant prayer.

Variations. Because the habit of rhythmic prayer frames the day, consider adapting one point for a different time in your day. Morning commuters might place their morning prayer before starting the car or while driving. It's a good way to prepare your soul for the battle that traffic can cause. Consider praying just before going into your workplace or back into your home, as a way to transition your mind and heart.

Embracing repetition. Just because prayers are repetitive doesn't mean they're meaningless. Quite the opposite. Often these prayers form us over time because of their constant presence. Absolutely intermix spontaneous Spirit-led prayers into your day, but building the trellis of repetitive prayer is the way to encourage more prayers to grow.

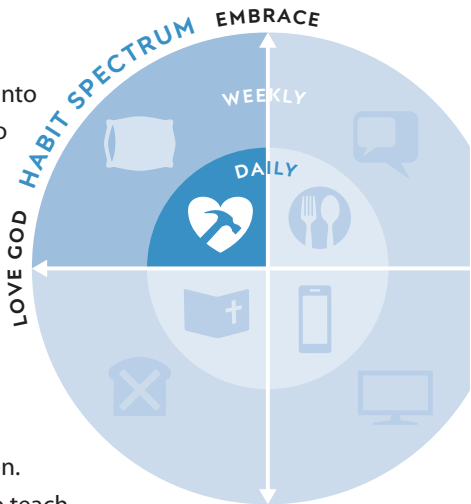
SAY YOUR PRAYERS UNTIL YOUR PRAYERS SAY YOU.

READING AND RESOURCES

The Book of Common Prayer

Every Moment Holy, Douglas Kaine McKelvey

Common Prayer, Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro



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