

# A GUIDE FOR TAKING QUIET DAYS

## Practical Tips

### INTRODUCTION

Taking time to be with God is a priority for any leader. Sadly in the busyness of ministry it is so easy to allow this to be squeezed out. Time each day is vital, but many also find that practising the spiritual disciplines of solitude and silence is a helpful way to maintain a vibrant relationship with Jesus. The following guidelines are offered in the hope they may provide some insights in how to make use of a day set aside to be with God. There are many ways of doing this, and many resources available to help. Some are listed at the end.

### FOR BUSY LEADERS

Our primary calling as a Christian leader is to be a child of our loving Father, a follower of our living Lord Jesus, and a bearer of the fruit of the Spirit. Nurturing this primary relationship with God as Trinity is the first responsibility of all Christian leaders. Taking time to cultivate this relationship is vital.

### TAKING TIME OUT

- **How often?** For most people establishing a regular pattern is a real help. This may be taking a day aside once a month, every six weeks, every two months, three times a year. Whatever, the key is to establish the pattern, put it in the diary, and stick to it. Be warned, everything will conspire against you taking this time.
- **Where to go?** It's important to find somewhere that helps you to relax and be still and quiet. A retreat house, a friend's home if they are not using it during the day, a particular spot of natural beauty (although be aware that ideally you need a place you can go to in all seasons). It needs to be relatively nearby, because you don't want to spend the whole day travelling.
- **How long?** This will depend on your personal circumstances. Some find it really helpful to go the night before and that enables them to have a relaxing evening simply unwinding. Others go for the day i.e. 9am-5pm. Whichever, try and make sure that you don't have anything work-oriented planned into your diary for the evening of that day, and preferably nothing major planned for the next day, otherwise you will spend your whole time with your mind on what you've got to do.
- **What do I do?** Be clear about the purpose of the day. A quiet day set aside to spend time with God is different from a prayer day. The latter is important, but normally involves us going with a set idea of what we want to do, i.e. to pray specifically for some aspect of our lives or ministry. Nor is it a study day where we take loads of books (albeit Christian ones) to learn more about God, or the work we're doing. The whole focus of a quiet day set aside to be with God is simply to meet with him, and in that sense we allow God to set the agenda. It is a day of abandoning ourselves into his hands. We are saying 'Here I am Lord, please meet with me in whatever way you think fit.'
- **How can I best prepare?** Try to make sure you don't enter the day exhausted. Get some good sleep during the previous few nights. Identify what you are going to do over the weeks leading up to the day. Be sure that by the day before you've got a clear outline in your mind of passages you might read. Ask for others to pray for your day, that you meet with God afresh. The night before, offer yourself to God in prayer, handing over the day to him and asking for his blessing.
- **How might such a day be shaped?** This is, of course, entirely up to you. Be sure not to overfill the day, and to allow space for relaxation and doing something re-creational. Here is a suggested pattern.

**9-9.15** Quieting down by acknowledging God's presence, offering yourself to him, and writing down any things that come crowding in that you need to take note of but are not a part of this day.

**9.15-10.00** Read a predetermined passage of Scripture in a meditative way (the *Lectio Divina* method pioneered by Ignatius can be really helpful). The aim of this time is not to prepare for your next sermon or talk, but to ask God to meet with you and speak with you through his word.

**10.00-10.30** Journal on the meditation, reflecting on what God has said. Here are some questions that might help in the journaling process.

⇒ What went on? What struck me? How did I feel about this?

- ⇒ What did the Lord show me? Anything I need to do?
- ⇒ Any recurring distraction?
- ⇒ Is there some point to pick up in my next prayer time?

During the review thank God for his favours and ask forgiveness for sin. Throughout ponder what God may want you to do in your life.

- ⇒ What is the next step in my relationship with God?
- ⇒ What is the next step in the development of my character?
- ⇒ What is the next step in my family life?
- ⇒ What is the next step in my work?

**10.30-11.30** Do something relaxing/creative. Go for a slow walk. Take notice of creation and allow God to speak to you through it. Paint, write poetry, compose a song, make something, write a Psalm, take photographs. In essence find a way that works for you of being creative, expressing something of what is in you to God, or allowing him to continue to feed you.

**11.45-12.15** Meditate on your second pre-chosen passage.

**12.15-12.45** Journal on your meditation.

**12.45-1.45** Have lunch, or if you are fasting pray for the poor of the world.

**1.45-2.15** Have a snooze. Go on, treat yourself. Alternatively get some gentle exercise.

**2.15-3.30** Meditate on a third pre-chosen passage.

**3.30-4.00** Journal on your meditation and on the day as a whole perhaps asking:

- ⇒ What do I sense God has been saying to me through this day?
- ⇒ What might I need to do as a result of this day?
- ⇒ How might I shape my daily life as a result of this day?

**4.00pm** Day ends. If at all possible do something you really enjoy in the evening. Go to see a film, have a meal out with someone you love, go ten pin bowling, go to a concert... basically have fun!

- **What do I do if the day is a real struggle?** We need to recognise that by placing ourselves entirely in God's hands we cannot govern the outcome of the day. Just because we have set aside a day to be spent in quiet with God doesn't mean it will necessarily be a spiritual high. That is why this is a discipline. God may well decide to hold himself back; because there are things he wants us to grapple with. Sometimes quiet days are not much more than hard work. That is why it is really important to prayerfully plan the day in advance and then stick to it, thereby not allowing our feelings or tiredness to govern the agenda. It can also be really helpful to have a wise and godly spiritual director who you can meet with two or three times a year to talk through your spiritual life, and perhaps share something of what happens on your quiet days.
- **How can I find out more?** Talk to older wiser Christians about their experience of setting aside time with God. In particular talk to those outside your tradition. You won't agree with everything they say, but you will gain valuable insights into how to spend time with God. You may also find the following books helpful.

## RESOURCES

- Liberated to Lead, Chapter 2 on Journaling, Colin Buckland (Monarch)
- The Life you've Always Wanted, John Ortberg (Zondervan)
- Seven Days of Solitude, Brother Ramon (Liguori Publications)
- Open To God, Joyce Huggett (Hodder)



# SEARCH ME O GOD

## Guides for Self Examination

Taken from Search Me O God The Practice of Self-Examination, Andrew Atherstone (Grove Spirituality 87)

### Prayers Before Self-examination



Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty,  
you search my heart and examine my inmost thoughts.  
I ask you now to help me in searching my own heart and life.  
Enable me to judge myself by the standard of your Holy Word.  
By your Holy Spirit show me the true state of my soul,  
give me repentance for all my past sins,  
heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ, the only Saviour from sin,  
and deep humility before you,  
for Jesus Christ's sake.  
Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of the Father,  
you are exalted as Prince and Saviour,  
to give repentance and forgiveness of sins.  
I come to you now for these blessings.  
My heart is hard and impenitent  
and little concerned by my sinfulness.  
Give me that broken and contrite heart which God does not despise.  
By your Holy Spirit, show me myself,  
and bring me back to your heavenly Father and mine.  
Returning to him, may I obtain mercy  
and find that he does abundantly pardon.  
Amen.

Adapted from Edward Bickersteth (1786-1850)

### Questions to Use During Self-examination



#### THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (EXODUS 20:1-17)

You shall have no other gods before me

- Do I love God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength?
- Is following God my absolute top priority?
- Do I acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the only way to God?
- Am I zealous for God's glory?

You shall not make for yourself an idol

- Where do I look for comfort and pleasure?
- Would I give up everything for God (possessions, career, family, health)?
- Do I try to make God in my own image?
- Have I distorted God's good gifts into idols?
- Am I enslaved by false thinking or the world's lies about money, sex and power?

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God

- Do I always remember the privilege of knowing God's name?
- Do I have a personal, intimate relationship with God?
- Do I honour and revere God?
- Am I offended when God's name is dishonoured?
- Do I seek to give glory to God with my words and actions?

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy

- Do I thank God for the blessing of work?
- Am I obsessed by work? Does it consume my time, energy and thoughts?
- Do I set aside one full day a week to rest?
- Do I find my value in what I achieve or in who I am in Christ?
- Do I trust God to provide even if I work less?

Honour your father and your mother

- Do I put effort into family relationships?
- Do I value and respect my parents? How do I express this?
- Do I listen to my parents' wisdom or despise it?
- Do I support my parents as they grow older?
- Am I the sort of parent that my children will want to honour?

You shall not murder

- Do I highly value all human life?
- Am I ever violent or abusive?
- How do I respond when I am humiliated, insulted or treated unfairly?
- Am I grieved by my unrighteous anger? Do I ever go to sleep angry?
- Am I quick to forgive, or do I hold grudges and seek revenge?
- Do I silently condone abortion or 'assisted suicide'?

You shall not commit adultery

- Do I treat sex as a precious holy gift from God?
- If single, am I sexually abstinent? If married, am I faithful?
- Do I flirt?
- Is my thought-life pure? Do I dwell on sexual images or look at others lustfully?
- Do I resist the temptation of pornography (in films, books, magazines, the internet)?

You shall not steal

- Do I hate greed?
- Have I acquired things (however small), which rightly belong to others?
- Am I strictly honest when it comes to money (tax, loans, debts, expenses)? Am I quick to pay what I owe?
- Do I put in the hours at work?
- Do I cultivate a habit of generous giving?

You shall not give false testimony

- Do I speak only what is true, shunning exaggeration and 'spin'?
- Do I gossip? Do I flatter?
- Am I a person of my word? Do I keep my promises?
- Do I face the truth about myself, or hide behind masks and pretence?

You shall not covet

- Am I ever jealous or envious of others?
- Does God or the world shape my desires?
- Do I rejoice with thankfulness at the ways God has blessed me?
- Am I content in every situation?
- Do I practise generosity?



## **THE BEATITUDES (MATTHEW 5:1-12)**

Am I poor in spirit?

- Do I feel my spiritual bankruptcy before God?
- Do I fight my spiritual pride?
- Am I acquainted with the depravity of my own evil heart?
- Do I receive the kingdom of heaven as an utterly undeserved gift?

Do I mourn for sin?

- Do I experience bitter sorrow at my repeated transgressions?
- Am I grieved by the world's evil?
- Do I truly appreciate the eternal consequences of sin?
- Do I rely on Christ alone for comfort?

Am I meek?

- Am I humble towards others, refusing to bully or domineer?
- Do I resist my lust for status and public recognition?
- Am I patient in the midst of difficulties?
- Do I gladly submit to God's will?

Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness?

- Do I realise my desperate lack of Christ-likeness?
- Do I have a consuming passion to be holy?
- Am I eager to be free from the power and pollution of sin?
- Do I actively promote righteousness in society?

Am I merciful?

- Am I quick to forgive or do I bear grudges?
- Do I share Christ's compassion for those in need?
- Am I actively involved in trying to relieve the miseries of others?
- Do I seek out the poor, the sick and the outcast?

Am I pure in heart?

- Am I whole-hearted in my devotion to God?
- Do I flee all temptations to impurity?
- Am I concerned for heart-righteousness rather than religious observance?
- Am I utterly sincere with no deceit or pretence?

Am I a peacemaker?

- Do I bring friends to Christ, that they might find peace with God?
- Am I quick to promote harmony, avoiding all dissensions?
- Do I actively seek to unite those who are divided?
- Do I work for reconciliation between communities, families and churches?

Am I persecuted because of righteousness?

- Is the only offence I give because of my loyalty to Christ?
- Is my lifestyle distinctive for holiness?
- Do I rejoice with gladness at persecution and slander against me?
- Am I seeking an earthly or a heavenly reward?

## **THE GOSPEL (ROMANS 1:16-18)**

- Am I humbled before God's grace and holiness?
- Have I deeply felt my corruption and guilt before God, deserving his wrath?
- Am I grieved by my sin?
- Do I recognise the danger I am in without Christ?
- Do I recognize my inability to save myself or am I trying to earn merit with God?
- Do I know and believe that the gospel is the only way of salvation?

- Do I rely on Jesus Christ as my only Saviour?
- Have I actually turned from my sin and put my faith in Christ?
- Am I seeking righteousness as a gift from God?
- Am I truly grateful to God for saving me?
- Do I show this by a desire to be holy and please him in all things?
- Am I ever ashamed of the gospel? Do I stand up for the gospel in all situations?

### **LOVE (1 CORINTHIANS 13)**

- Do I count love as the best and greatest gift?
- Are my life and relationships characterised by self-sacrificial love?
- Do I imitate the love of Christ?
- Am I patient and long-suffering?
- Am I kind? Do I 'go the extra mile'?
- Am I envious or do I celebrate when good things happen to others?
- Am I boastful? Am I puffed up with my own importance? Am I proud?
- Am I rude?
- Am I self-seeking? Do I demand my rights and put my own interests first?
- Am I easily angered? Do I look for the best in other people or magnify their weaknesses?
- Do I keep a record of wrongs, or am I quick to forgive?
- Do I reject evil and rejoice when truth prevails?
- Do I always protect, always trust, always hope, and always persevere?
- Am I grieved that I show so little of this love?
- Is it my constant aim to possess more of this great gift that never fails? Do I pray for it and work at it?
- Do I thank Christ for his overwhelming love for me – a love shown by his willingness to die on the cross for my sake?

### **EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY WISDOM (JAMES 3:13-18)**

- Where am I looking for wisdom – to God or to the world's ideas?
- Do I deny the truth of God's word through my actions?
- Do I harbour bitter envy or selfish ambition?
- Am I overly concerned for my position, my dignity, my rights?
- Do I contribute to disorder, hurt or division?
- Am I humble or inclined to boast?
- Am I pure, like Jesus Christ?
- Am I peace-loving?
- Am I considerate, gracious, and tolerant?
- Am I submissive and teachable?
- Am I full of mercy and good fruit?
- Am I compassionate and quick to forgive?
- Am I impartial or double-minded?
- Am I sincere? Does my private life match my public image?
- Do I earnestly desire righteousness?
- Can God's wisdom be seen in the way I live my life?

### **THE CHRISTIAN GRACES (2 PETER 1:3-7)**

- Am I seeking to live by God's power or in my own strength?
- Do I receive God's promises in the Bible as trustworthy and true?
- Do I treat them as very great and precious?
- Have they changed my heart?
- Have they led me to flee the corruption in the world and all evil desires?
- Have I put my faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation?
- Am I making every effort to add to my faith in all Christian graces?
- Have I added Christ-like goodness? Do I demonstrate this by my actions?
- Have I added knowledge? Do I read, think and discuss as a Christian?
- Have I added self-control? Do I restrain my natural appetites and desires?
- Have I added perseverance? Do I keep going despite difficulties and opposition?



- Have I added godliness? Do I walk closely with Christ?
- Have I added brotherly kindness? Do I show care for my fellow Christians?
- Have I added love? Do I love as Christ loves?

## Confessions After Self-examination



Lord God,  
 I have sinned against you;  
 I have done evil in your sight.  
 I am sorry and repent, in particular of \_\_\_\_\_  
 Have mercy on me according to your love.  
 Wash away my wrongdoing and cleanse me from my sin.  
 Renew a right spirit within me  
 And restore me to the joy of your salvation,  
 Through Jesus Christ my Lord.  
 Amen

Adapted from Common Worship

O most mighty God, merciful Father,  
 who has compassion on all people and hates nothing you have made,  
 who does not desire the death of a sinner,  
 but rather that we should turn from our sin and be saved,  
 mercifully forgive my wrongdoing.  
 In particular I repent of \_\_\_\_\_  
 I am grieved and weighed down with the burden of my sins:  
 receive and comfort me.  
 Your nature is always to have mercy,  
 only you can forgive sins.  
 Spare me good Lord, who you have redeemed,  
 do not bring your servant into judgement.  
 I acknowledge my wickedness and truly repent of my sin:  
 turn your anger from me and come quickly to save me,  
 that I may live with you forever,  
 through Jesus Christ my Lord.  
 Amen

Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer

# THE GENERAL EXAMEN

## Different Ways to Practise the Examen

### Short Form

This can be practised at any time during the day but is especially suitable as a final thought in bed before falling asleep. It takes hardly any time so it can be done several times in one day. Although it is a short form, it incorporates the principles of the examen into a regular, instinctive habit of self-awareness.

Of the things that I have done today:

- Which do I now feel most happy about? I will thank God for these times.
- Which do I now feel most discomfort about? I will ask for God's help to cope better with such situations in the future, and, where fitting, I will say that I am sorry.

### Long Form

This is a rephrasing and expansion of Ignatius' general examen that appears (with acknowledgement to J. Roger Greenwood) in John A. Veltri's *Orientations Vol 1* (Loyola House, Guelph, Canada, 1979). It is called the 'examen of consciousness'. 'Conscience' and 'consciousness' are represented by the same word in Latin, and many people find this title more suitable and accurate. The examen follows Ignatius' five points:

- Give thanks.
- Ask for grace.
- Recall.
- Ask pardon.
- Resolve to amend.

This exercise takes about a quarter of an hour. It is a good form of prayer to use in the evening, when it is natural for us to remember our day and look ahead to the next morning.

#### 1. THANKSGIVING

Begin by looking over the day and asking to see where you need to be thankful. Do not choose what you think you should be thankful for; rather, by merely looking over the day, see what emerges, what you notice, even slightly. How do you feel towards what is shown to you? Do you see the giftedness of your life? Do you sense your own poverty? Allow gratitude to take hold of you and express this to the Father, Son and Spirit.

#### 2. ASK FOR LIGHT

This is a prayer for enlightenment from God, not from your own analysis of the day. Therefore ask the Holy Spirit to show you what he wants you to see.

#### 3. FINDING GOD IN ALL THINGS

Again look over the events of the day. This time ask the Lord to show you where he has been present in your life, either in you or in others, and what he has been asking of you. Look over your interior moods, feelings, urges, and movements, and see what stands out even slightly. Look for such things as joy, pain, turmoil, increase of love, anger, harmony, anxiety, freedom, enchainment, presence of God, isolation. In what general direction do you think you are being drawn by the Lord? How have you been responding to these experiences or situations that draw you towards the Lord and invite you to be more like him?

More particularly, what attitudes are manifest in these experiences? Remember that your experience helps you to discover the underlying attitude, and your actions and choices flow from these attitudes. Is there any one place in your heart or any one area you are being asked to focus your attention on, to pray more seriously over, to take action on? This is where your energy needs to focus on instead of on the many other things you think are important.

#### 4. THE GIFTS OF SORROW, FORGIVENESS, AND GRATITUDE

Seek forgiveness from the Lord for the moments you did not respond to his love. Do not be afraid to ask for the gift of an ever-deepening sorrow for not co-operating with him who loves you. Praise the Lord for those moments you have been co-operating with him.



## 5. HELP AND GUIDANCE FOR TOMORROW

Ask the Father for your needs for tomorrow. For example, you may need to pray to overcome something – or to accept your ‘thorn in the flesh’ – to persevere – to be more sensitive to the Lord’s activity in your life – to let go – to love more – to have a conversion in some area – etc. There is nothing that can be done without God’s loving assistance and guidance, so ask, look for, trust and co-operate with the Father, Son and Spirit living within you.

## Examen of a Whole Life

Here is an example of how one could make an examen of one’s entire life. It is best made with pen and paper to hand. The basic principles of the examen can be applied to any period of time – the preceding hour (as in the review of prayer), day, term, year... the time one has lived in the same place or done the same job... or one’s entire life up till now.

- I begin from the desire to see my life as part of salvation history. As well as the external human history, there is another dimension – the story of God’s work in me. On the one hand are the opportunities God has provided; on the other are my half-hearted responses. So I begin with thanking God for bringing me to where I now am.
- I want this examination to be as honest as possible. So I ask God for knowledge of the truth, including knowledge of my sins.
- This third point is the main part of the exercise. I make a note of the most important steps in my growing relationship with God (about eight is a good number). These steps, or stepping-stones, may be single events, or they may be periods of growth. They may be explicitly religious, or they may be connected to the human process of maturing that I did not think of in terms of God at the time. I make a brief note of each as it occurs to me. Afterwards I can order them chronologically, so I have an idea of the overall shape of my life. There may also be steps backward, or perhaps sideways. When I have done this I am in a position to see what in my life I want to thank God for. I take time over this, being grateful for all that now seems positive in my history. Only after I have done that do I look at the ways in which I have fallen short. Remembering the events that I am now grateful for, how could I have given more room in my life for the things that really matter?
- I express my sorrow for the ways in which I have sinned and the areas of my life in which there is still an element of sin.
- What priorities would I like to reaffirm for the future? Are there any practical steps I can take that would help redirect my life on better lines?
- I may close the exercise with the Lord’s Prayer, which puts my request for forgiveness in the context of God’s will for the world.

Taken from Margaret Hebblethwaite, *St Ignatius – Finding God in All Things*, Marshall, ISBN 0-00-628101-X.



# PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES

## The Practice of Lectio Divina

### 1. READING: LECTIO

Gently read the Scriptures aloud to yourself slowly savouring and repeating the parts of the text that speak to the depths of your heart. Listen to the Word 'with the ear of your heart', and be willing to linger on portions of the text that seem to speak to you in a special way.

Through repetition, gently allow the text to percolate into your memory. Be willing to set the printed text aside and to listen quietly to the Word that you have taken into your heart.

### 2. MEDITATION: MEDITATIO (RUMINATION)

Lovingly and slowly repeat the text you have internalised. Allow this interior 'mulling over' to help the text 'yield its savour'. Allow the text to interact with your memories, your hopes, your concerns. Don't be afraid of 'distractions'; simply acknowledge them and let go of them, always returning to the portion of the Scriptures you have taken into your heart.

### 3. PRAYER: ORATIO

Let the text summon you to place before the Lord all of yourself. Make the Word you have taken into yourself be a real word of consecration – a Word of blessing and a means of offering to the Lord your deepest hopes and concerns. Let the gentle repetition of the Word lead you into a dialogue with the God who originally inspired the text, and who has now used the Scriptures as a way of drawing you into his presence.

### 4. CONTEMPLATION: CONTEMPLATIO

As you feel called to do so, simply rest silently in the presence of the Lord. Be willing to let go of the text that has led you into God's presence. Enjoy the sweetness of silent communion with the God who stands behind the Scriptures.

### CONCLUSION

Recognise that these steps are not stages in an orderly process: they are a way of allowing the inner rhythms of our spiritual lives to become more and more charged with the presence of God. We are not to judge the quality of our Lectio by how much or how little time we spend in any of the above activities. The rhythm of Lectio Divina reflects the rhythm of our lives: we may move from one step to another without realising it; and we may find several steps coexisting at the same time. Lectio Divina is simply a way of experiencing in our reading of the Scriptures what God intends our whole lives to become – a continuous experience of his presence, a continual and unending prayer.

'Reading you should seek; meditation you will find; praying you should call; and contemplating, the door will be opened to you.'

Abbot Guigo 11 (Carthusian in 12 Century)

'I reads myself full; I think myself clear; I prays myself hot; I lets myself cool.'

Southern US Pastor's Prayer