



Reverend Canon Peter Stuart  
Lent 2  
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## PRAYER AND THE REDEEMING OF TIME

Ephesians 5:15-16 *'Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity (or 'redeeming the time') because the days are evil.'*

Prayer. It's very simple. As simple as a child talking with their father or mother. As simple as two people talking to one another as they journey together. Prayer is very simple. But it's not easy. And a lot of the difficulty comes from how we mesh prayer and time together.

So how should I start a sermon on 'Prayer and the redeeming of time'? I think by taking off my watch and holding it up. Now, you're wondering, 'is it going to be a short sermon or a long one? Oh, oh, he's throwing the watch away. Does that mean he's not even going to bother to time himself today?'

Well, some ten minutes can seem like a hundred. And some hundred minutes can seem like ten. That's the first thing to note about time. There's **clock** time and there's **psychological** time, time as we experience it, here inside us.

I think prayer does have quite a lot to do with clock time, but it has a great deal to do with psychological time. Time as we **experience** it.

And the most important way a Christian should **experience** time is as a **gift of God**. Time is a gift of God. You and I may give back to God only a few minutes, a few hours. We may grudgingly allow God some momentary attention, and then turn back to using time for our own purposes. But the deep reality is, all time and all **our** time, is a gift of God. And unless we live our life, live out 'our' time, as a gift from God, at our deepest level we will be restless, unsatisfied, unfulfilled.

It's strange. It's possible to believe and talk about **life** as a gift of God, and yet hold on grimly to 'our' **time** as though it were our possession, to dispose of as we will. Do you order your time according to your own will or God's will?

One of the most important elements in the spiritual life is to learn to surrender our time back to God, give back that gift, trustingly, thankfully. How are we to do that?

First, by having a daily discipline of prayer, one which includes **beginning** each day with prayer. It's the experience of countless Christians, and my own hard-won experience, that if you don't **begin** the day with God, it's very likely that that day will be lost to Him. When I pray in the morning, the day is usually spiritually fruitful. I may be very busy or I may not be, but either way, things flow, there is a wholeness about the day. And what's achieved is not mere work, but something at a deeper level, in my life and in other people's lives. But when I don't pray at the beginning of the day, I so often struggle on in my own strength and wisdom. In the mercy of God, something may be achieved, but in spite of me, not because of me.

You see, it's when we turn to God in prayer, both disciplined and spontaneous, that we make room for the Holy Spirit to act in us and through us. And the time to begin turning to God is at the **beginning** of each day, the **beginning** of each week, the **beginning** of each year.

Let's move on. Most of you know Rudyard Kipling's poem, 'If'. There are some lines in it which go like this: *'If you can fill the unforgiving minute/ With sixty seconds worth of distance run.../you'll be a man, my son.'*

True, or false? I think a bit of both. The full use of our time **is** absolutely crucial. That sixty seconds won't come round again. God has a purpose for us to fulfil in it. Did we or didn't we?

But that purpose may not have been cramming it with hectic activity. It may be that God wants us to be completely still for that minute. Or to work slowly, with a different rhythm from normal. Or He may want us to feast and play. There is a rhythm of life which God has built into our human nature. And we must learn to shape our use of time in accordance with that rhythm.

This is where a simple Rule of Life can be so useful - when you put down on paper a **realistic** outline of how you are going to 'organise', 'shape' your spiritual life. And you can't shape or discipline your spiritual life without shaping, disciplining your use of time.

I once came across some useful headings in a book by Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering your private world.*' There he sets out his 'Laws of unseized time':

1. Unseized time flows towards my weaknesses. True?
2. Unseized time comes under the influence of dominant people in my world. True?
3. Unseized time surrenders to the demands of emergencies. True?
4. Unseized time gets invested in things that gain the approval of others. True?

According to MacDonald, this is how time is 'recaptured':

1. I must know my rhythms of maximum effectiveness.
2. I must have good criteria for choosing how to use my time.
3. I seize time and command it when I budget it far in advance.

Now all this talk of 'unseized time' and 'recaptured time' **can** land us into a self-centred activism, or a religion of justification by works, by which we try to grab time for our own purposes. There are some selfish people out there who organise their time very well. But if we **are** surrendered to Christ, if by prayer we are opening ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives, if we are continually experiencing time as a gracious gift from God, then actually these principles of MacDonald's can help us quite a lot. Principles like these can help us make a **response** to God's love which is **disciplined**. We become not 'Time Lords', but stewards of the Lord's time.

So pray as early as you can in the day, however briefly, so long as you are sufficiently conscious to make it real prayer, from the heart. (Whether you do it before or after your first coffee, is your call.) Start the day in the presence of God, and receive the day as a gift from God and surrender it back to Him.

Now, how should we **end** the day, after such a beginning? There's a practice called the 'examen' which is useful. It takes various forms but essentially there are two: the 'examen of conscience', and the 'examen of consciousness'. I prefer

the latter, the examen of consciousness, because it will include the former. You get still in the presence of God, and then in a relaxed way look back over your day, and ask questions like 'were there any moments I was especially aware of God? Which people did I have real personal contact with? What did I accomplish? Where did I feel most alive, most myself? Was there anything new I learned today? What do I regret?' And pray briefly about these things as you go along, focussing especially on giving thanks.

There's also a lovely service of 'Night Prayer' in our Prayer Book (though it takes a bit longer than the 'examen', and it doesn't lead us fully into the questions of the 'examen'). There's a prayer in that service which includes the words, 'It is night after a long day. What has been done has been done; what has not been done had not been done; let it be'. I love those words.

So we start each day with faith and hope and self-offering, and end it with thanksgiving and trust.

What about the daylight hours in between? That calls for another sermon, another day.

But there should be a time or times during the day when we always stand back intentionally from what we are doing, and pray, whether we feel like it or not. (If we only pray when we feel like it, we will end up by praying less and less.) Muslims are called to such intentional prayer five times a day (and many of them do it); Christian monks seven times a day. Jesus assumes His disciples will do it, and in the 'Sermon on the Mount'. He says, *'when you pray, go into a room by yourself, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.'* Jesus was talking primarily about the need to practise our religion not to win the approval of others but to please God, like a child seeking to please the Father they love. But Jesus is also assuming that we **will** go apart by ourselves and pray. He says 'When you pray' not 'if you pray'. If we aren't doing this, then His words challenge us about the depth, the reality, and the sincerity of our public worship. Why is each of us here?

Now what each of us do intentionally in that room, that apartness, will vary according to our circumstances, our personalities, and what we are being called to do at this particular stage of our lives. It should certainly include encountering

God in prayerful reading of the Bible (if you have time to read most of the newspaper, then you also have time to open your Bible). But we should perhaps include one or more of the daily services in our Prayer Book. Or perhaps silent meditation. Or perhaps intercession. Or all or some of these. There are many devotional practices. I myself often say that lovely prayer the Angelus at midday. It's best to weave all this into a realistic 'Rule of Life', perhaps with the help of an experienced Christian. It's the best way to 'recapture' time for God.

Yet the final point I want to explore is the importance of being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit moment by moment. Yes, **one** result of giving the gift of time back to God **is** that He leads us into a disciplined, orderly use of time. But that discipline, that order should never be so tight, so complete, so systematic, that we can't hear and respond to God in the moment, by prayer or by action. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of order, but He is also the Spirit of spontaneity. We must be open to surprises of God. And they will come each day when we are truly surrendered to Him. The ordering of time is a means to an end - to our being trained to turn ourselves to God, to attend to God, to be sensitive to His leadings in the particular moment.

If we **begin** the day by obediently giving time to Him in prayer, then we will be far more likely later in the day to sense, at a particular moment, God's voice saying 'go for it, this is important'. And you take the crest of the wave, and something significant gets done in the Kingdom of God. Unplanned - by you; unforeseen - by you. But you were there, in the right place at the right time, with the right inner attitude.

St Paul says (in Ephesians 5:15-16) '*Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity (or 'redeeming the time') because the days are evil.*' And he also urges us (in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18), '*Always be joyful; pray continually; give thanks whatever happens; for this is what God wills for you in Christ Jesus.*'

The most joyful people I know are those who have discovered the secret of such continual prayer, and joy flows out of them. They walk in blessedness. May you and I be similarly blessed.

***A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Peter Stuart in the Anglican Parish of Eastbourne on 12 March 2017.***