



Emotionally Healthy Relationships Day by Day

A 40-DAY JOURNEY *to* DEEPLY
CHANGE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS



Peter Scazzero

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Day by Day

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 **ZONDERVAN®**



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ISBN 978-0-310-34959-4 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-34960-0 (ebook)

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Author is represented by The Christopher Ferebee Agency, www.christopherferebee.com

Cover photo: Andrew Kuzmin / Shutterstock®

Interior design: Kait Lamphere

First Printing June 2017 / Printed in the United States of America

To June Eileen Sunquist

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Acknowledgments



I want to begin by acknowledging the pioneering work of Benedict of Nursia, the sixth-century Italian monk, for making widely available to the Western Church the practice of the Daily Office. And I am grateful to the Trappist monks of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, who first offered me a lived experience of the beauty and power of stopping to be with God multiple times a day during a 2003 weeklong retreat.

I also want to acknowledge Christine Anderson for the rich combination of editorial gifts she brought to this project. Her eye for consistency and fractures in my logic made it a much better, and richer, devotional. Thank you, Christine, for consistently pushing me to be a better writer. Thanks also to Greg Clouse at Zondervan for carrying this *EH Relationships Day by Day* to completion, bringing a patient, careful, editorial eye to detail.

The Emotionally Healthy Spirituality team at Zondervan have been wonderful partners over the years. A special thanks to Sandy Vander Zicht, John Raymond, Tom Dean, Ryan Pazdur, Beth Murphy, and David Morris. Your love for Christ

and publishing expertise is a gift to the work of God around the world.

And finally, a thank you to Geri, my lovely wife and best friend. Thank you, Geri, for being the most godly, amazing woman I know.

Loving Others Begins with Loving God



A number of years ago, a friend who had quit attending church asked me privately, “Why is it that so many Christians make such lousy human beings?” In other words, why are so many of us judgmental, defensive, and touchy?

I believe part of the reason stems from the fact that we so readily compartmentalize loving God from loving others. This was something the religious leaders in Jesus’ day did as well. They were diligent and zealous to love God, but they were not equally diligent and zealous to love people. This put them on a collision course with Jesus. Toward the end of his ministry, Jesus summarized the entire Bible for them with these words: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart.’ . . . This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37–40). When we experience a breakdown in our relationship with God, a breakdown in our relationship with people follows. The connection between the two is unbreakable.

Jesus also linked our ability to love people with our ability to bear witness to him in the world: “Everyone will know you are my

disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). In other words, when we don’t love well, the implications go beyond our personal lives, our families, our neighborhoods, and our churches. When we don’t love others well, the beauty and love of Jesus is tarnished and sullied to the world.

So it is critically important that we grow as Christ followers in our ability to love people. That is the purpose behind *The Emotionally Healthy (EH) Relationships Course*, which teaches eight core relationship skills that equip us to love others in a mature way. Yet, this is not enough. We must also mature in our relationship with Jesus, opening our human relationships to him so he can reshape them as he reshapes us. That is the reason this devotional guide is developed from and anchored to the eight foundational skills of *The EH Relationships Course*.¹

Sadly, too many of us have a relationship with Jesus that is seriously underdeveloped. We talk *to* God, or even perhaps *at* God, but we don’t actually listen to him very much. And that is nothing less than a spiritual crisis.

But what if I told you that, while the problem is real and pervasive, it is far from a lost cause? There *is* a way to live a relaxed, unhurried, contented life in Jesus amid the pressures and difficulties of life. There *is* a way to mature into spiritual adulthood anchored in the love of God. There *is* a way to remain thoughtful when triggered in conversations, and to listen for God’s voice in those experiences. There *is* a way to surrender to God’s love and will when we are tempted to lash out or be judgmental—even when it is difficult. There *is* a way to give

our lives in service to others without becoming chronically exhausted. How are all these things possible? The answer lies in intentionally rearranging our days to routinely integrate the Christian practice of being still and silent in God's presence.

AN ANCIENT AND REVOLUTIONARY SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

The purpose of this book is to introduce you to this spiritual discipline that is both ancient and revolutionary. It's called the "Daily Office."² The Daily Office provides a structured way of spending time with God each day, but it differs from what we tend to think of as "quiet time" or "devotions." Quiet time and devotions normally take place once a day, usually in the morning, and focus on "getting filled up" for the day or on interceding for the needs of others. The Daily Office takes place at least twice a day, and is not so much about turning to God to *get* something as it is turning to God to simply *be with* him.

The goal of the Daily Office is to pay attention to God throughout the entire day—in *the midst of our activities*. This is the great challenge for all of us. The enormous pressure of the world and our own stubborn self-will make it extraordinarily difficult to sustain any consistent awareness of God's presence. But it is far from impossible.

So why is it called the "Daily Office"? The word *office* comes from the Latin word *opus*, or "work." For the early church, the Daily Office—praying at fixed times throughout the day—was

always the first “work of God” to be done. Nothing was to interfere with that priority.

But this practice of fixed-hour prayer is one that actually long predates the early church. Three thousand years ago, King David practiced set times of prayer seven times a day (Psalm 119:164). The prophet Daniel prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10). Devout Jews in Jesus’ time prayed at morning, afternoon, and evening. Such set times of prayer were one of the Israelites’ great spiritual and cultural treasures, a practical way to keep their lives centered on loving God at all times. Even after the resurrection, Jesus’ disciples continued to pray at certain hours of the day (Acts 3:1; 10:2–23).

It was about AD 525 when a monk named Benedict created a formal structure for these prayer times that he anchored in eight Daily Offices (including one for monks in the middle of the night). Prayer was the framework for the day, and everything else in their lives was ordered around it. Benedict wrote: “On hearing the signal for an hour of the divine office, the monk will immediately set aside what he has in hand and go with utmost speed. Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God [the Daily Office].”³

All of these people—from the ancient Israelites to first-century disciples and early Christian leaders like Benedict—realized that stopping to be with God, by means of the Daily Office, was the key to creating a continual and easy familiarity with God’s presence. And having practiced the Daily Office for over fifteen years, I can affirm it has done that for me. Routinely setting aside small units of time for morning, midday, and evening prayer infuses the activities of my day with a deep

awareness of the sacred—of God. In those moments, I remember that all time is God's time. There is no division between the sacred and the secular.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Emotionally Healthy Relationships Day by Day provides a flexible structure for your time with God. My hope is that you will adapt it to the unique needs and demands of this season in your life. God has built each of us differently. What works for one person will not necessarily work for another, and what worked for you at one time in the past may no longer work for you now. Allow grace—not legalism—to be the foundation for your practice.

The book includes material to guide you through a forty-day journey of praying the Daily Office. I've collected the days into eight weekly themes, each one based on a session theme from *The EH Relationships Course*.⁴

Week One: Take Your Community Temperature Reading

Week Two: Stop Mind Reading and Clarify Expectations

Week Three: Genogram Your Family

Week Four: Explore the Iceberg

Week Five: Listen Incarnationally

Week Six: Climb the Ladder of Integrity

Week Seven: Fight Cleanly

Week Eight: Develop a Rule of Life to Implement
Emotionally Healthy Skills

These skills, or tools, have been developed, refined, and lived out for more than twenty-one years at New Life Fellowship Church. They are designed to help ordinary people in diverse contexts to unlock and live out Scripture's command to love well in our homes, churches, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods. The goal is to grow us into emotionally mature adults who love others so distinctly that they know Jesus is truly alive and present in their midst. As previously noted, the Offices in this devotional supplement the content of *The EH Relationships Course* (which also includes a DVD and workbook) and provide a means to stay deeply connected to Jesus, who reminds us: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5b). On the last page of the devotional you will find a checklist to keep you on track as you move through the Course. Fill it out along the way and, when completed, go to emotionallyhealthy.org to receive your certificate of completion.

There are two Offices per day—one for morning or midday, and the other for midday or evening. You may, for example, do one in the morning and the other at midday, or one at midday and the other in the evening before you go to bed. You choose the length of time for your Offices. The key, however, is to keep your focus on attending to God, not the number of minutes you spend with God. Pausing to be with God might last anywhere from two to twenty to forty-five minutes. My wife, Geri, and I choose to have longer times with God in the mornings and then shorter ones at midday and in the evenings. It is up to you.

Each Office contains five elements: Silence and Stillness, Scripture, Devotional, Question to Consider, and Prayer.

I. Silence and Stillness

This is the foundation of a Daily Office. We stop our activity and turn our attention to the Living God. We heed the words of the psalmist: “Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7), and “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). We choose to enter into awareness of God’s presence and to rest there in his love. That choice alone is no small feat. There are occasions when I pause for my midday prayer and find that I spend the entire time—be it five or twenty minutes—centering my thoughts so I can let go of tensions and distractions and begin resting in the love of God.

Each Office begins and ends with two minutes of silence and stillness. Many religions have some practice of silence, so there is nothing particularly Christian about the silence itself. What makes silence unique for us as followers of Christ is that we are still and silent in the context of our relationship with the living God. In a posture of attentiveness and surrender, we allow him and his will access to the innermost parts of our lives. This is the very core of what it means to be in loving union with him.⁵

This may be difficult for you, especially at first. Our internal and external worlds are filled with noise and distractions. For this reason, spending time alone with God in silence is perhaps the most challenging and least experienced spiritual practice among Christians today. However, that doesn’t justify taking a pass. If we fail to learn how to be quiet in God’s presence—to stop talking long enough and routinely enough to listen—how

will we ever mature into Christian adults? How will our relationship with God develop any depth?

There are a number of ways to approach this. The following are a few guidelines to help you begin entering into silence and stillness:⁶

- Settle into a comfortable and quiet place. Take a few deep breaths, allowing yourself to inhale and exhale slowly. (For additional guidance on a practice called the “breath prayer,” see Appendix B.)
- Begin with a simple prayer—often just one word—that expresses your openness to God and your desire to spend time with him. You might use your favorite name for God, such as *Abba*, *Father*, or *Jesus*. Or you could use a phrase such as, *Here I am*, *Lord*. (My wife, Geri, often doesn’t use any words, preferring to spend time with Jesus as two lovers might, content to simply be together in a quiet corner. In those moments, she imagines God wrapping his arms of love around her.)
- When distractions come—and they most certainly will come—entrust them to God’s care and use your simple prayer phrase to turn your thoughts back to God.

Give yourself lots of grace here, especially at the beginning. Remember, this is a revolutionary and countercultural practice, not a walk in the park. When you choose to sit in silence and stillness, you are choosing to allow God to be the center of your

life. That means you are choosing, even if just for a few moments, to let go of control and your own agenda.

That is no small thing.

If you persevere through the awkwardness at the beginning—if you truly stop to surrender your will to God’s will—you will begin to experience a gradual transformation. And slowly, you will find that silence will become a normal and regular part of each day. You will find yourself briefly pausing for silence, for example, before turning on the car, writing a difficult email, or starting a meeting at work. Before you begin, you may find it helpful to read through Appendix C: *Top Ten FAQs about Practicing Silence*.

2. Scripture

The important thing to remember here is the adage that “less is more.” The Scripture selections are intentionally brief. Read slowly—possibly aloud—chewing on any words or phrases that stand out to you. If God leads you to linger over a verse, do so. Be attentive to what God is doing inside you. There is no need to finish all that is provided for each office! Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you.

3. Devotional

Readings are drawn from a wide variety of sources—ancient spiritual writers, poets, monks, rabbis, and contemporary writers, as well as some of my own writings. As with Scripture, these selections are meant to be read slowly and prayerfully. There

are times when I come to the midday or evening office with so much on my mind that I actually choose to begin my time of silence with the devotional reading as a means of redirecting my thoughts to God. Sometimes the readings will speak powerfully to where you are. At other times, you may find yourself wanting to skim or skip them. Once again, it's important to remember that the purpose of the Daily Office is to commune with God, not to get through all the reading!

4. Question to Consider

Each office ends with a brief but probing question. You may find it helpful to write out your answers in the form of a prayer to God. Or, if you don't find the questions helpful, feel free to skip them. If you use this guide repeatedly over time, don't be surprised if God leads you along very different paths as you reflect on the questions each time.

5. Prayer

For a large part of my Christian life, I avoided written prayers. In recent years, however, I have found them to be a rich supplement to my devotional life. You may want to pray the words as written, or simply use them as inspiration and a starting point for your own prayers. Note that The Lord's Prayer is included in Appendix A as an additional resource for your time with God. Because of its depth and simplicity, I often pray it as part of my Daily Offices each day. Again, use these prayers only if you find them helpful.

In Appendix D, I have also included instructions about compline (pronounced “comp-line” or “comp-lin”), which is a going-to-sleep prayer of trust. Although it is prayed at the end of the day, I find that it also helps me to pay attention to God during all my waking hours.

USING THE DAILY OFFICE WITH GROUPS

The Daily Offices are written for individuals but they can be easily adapted for groups meeting for morning, midday, or evening prayer. Here are a few guidelines:

- Appoint a facilitator to pace the time.
- Read the Scripture selections aloud together.
- Appoint one person to read aloud the Devotional and the Question to Consider.
- Pause briefly—five to ten seconds—between each section of the Office.
- **Option:** When our staff at New Life meets for midday prayer, rather than read the closing prayer aloud together at the end, we break up into groups of two or three for intercession, and then close with a worship song. Be flexible for what works best in your context.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

As you begin your journey with the Daily Office, I encourage you to allow yourself a lot of time and practice to make progress. Few of us have life-giving rhythms, so rearranging our days to stop and be with Jesus is a major shift. Add to this the reality that little silence exists in the culture, our families of origin, even in our churches, and the challenge can feel overwhelming. But I can assure you that if you will persevere and ask the Holy Spirit for help, you will find that God has been waiting for you. You will get to know him in ways that can happen only in silence (Psalm 46:10). Your listening-to-God “muscles” may develop slowly, but they will develop. By God’s grace, your capacity to be with Jesus will enlarge and expand. Your relationships will change, with more of Jesus flowing out of you and less of the bad patterns you may have learned from the culture or your family of origin. But most importantly, you will discover, as millions of others have across the ages, that his love really is better than life (Psalm 63:3).

Take Your Community Temperature Reading



DAILY OFFICES

Week One

One of the most loving, God-glorifying things we can do in our relationships is to speak in healthy, loving ways. In fact, part of the reason God gives us the gift of words is to express ourselves and to nurture life-giving relationships. Nevertheless, our relationships often stagnate or suffer because we are unsure of how to do that in practical ways.

When we use the skill called Take Your Community Temperature Reading, we are intentional about utilizing words to express ourselves and nurture relationships in practical ways, such as speaking appreciations, sharing hopes and dreams, and stating complaints maturely. This is how we take our first steps in integrating a growing love for God with a growing love for others and ourselves.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Daily Offices throughout this book were written to be used in companionship with *The Emotionally Healthy (EH) Relationships Course*. Each week, the corresponding session from the course and the DVD are listed as additional resources.

- *The Emotionally Healthy Relationships Workbook*, Session 1
- *The Emotionally Healthy Relationships DVD*, Session 1

DAY 1 MORNING/MIDDAY OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: John 15:4–5, 8–9, 12

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. . . . This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. . . . My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

Devotional

Loving well is the essence of true spirituality. It requires experiencing connection with God, with others, and with oneself. It begins, however, with our response to God's invitation to practice his presence in our daily lives. He then invites us to "practice the presence of people" within an awareness of his presence. But learning to practice his presence is no small task.

There is perhaps no greater teacher to offer us insight on how to do this than Brother Lawrence, an obscure, sixteenth-century Carmelite monk from Paris. He resolved to live in continual awareness of God's presence, to never to forget him from one

moment to the next. In fact, he defined prayer as simply cultivating an awareness of the presence of God.

These words from Brother Lawrence have served me well over the years, helping me to remain in Jesus when I am distracted:

The time of business . . . does not differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of the kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees. . . .

I make it my business only to persevere in his holy presence . . . which I may call an actual presence of God; or, to speak better, an habitual, silent and secret conversation of the soul with God.⁷

Jesus said it simply: If we remain in him, allowing ourselves to be held in his embrace, his life will flow out of us to others. If we choose not to remain in him, we will have little, if anything, to offer others.

Question to Consider

When can you set aside uninterrupted time each day to begin cultivating an awareness of the presence of God?

Prayer

Lord, it is so easy for me to go through my days without remembering or thinking about you. And it is even easier for me to

overlook your beauty in the people around me. Please change the unhealthy ways of relating that are so deeply rooted in me. Shape me into a person who offers your tenderness and kindness to those I come in contact with today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

DAY 1 MIDDAY/EVENING OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: Romans 7:18b–21, 24–45

For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. . . . What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Devotional

Jean Vanier is the founder of L'Arche, an international network of 147 communities in thirty-five countries, for persons with mental and physical disabilities. While Vanier was visiting France in 1963, he had his first encounter with men living in

government-sponsored psychiatric hospitals, and he quickly understood them to be “the most oppressed people on the planet.” The first L’Arche community began a few months later when he invited two men, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, to leave their institution and live with him in a small village north of Paris. His insights about our task and difficulty to love well are powerful:

Living with men and women with mental disabilities has helped me to discover what it means to live in communion with someone. To be in communion means to be with someone . . . accepting people just as they are, with all their limits and inner pain, but also with their gifts and their beauty . . . to see the beauty inside of all the pain. To love someone is not first of all to do things for them, but to reveal to them their beauty and value, to say to them through our attitude: “You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself. . . .”

Communion did not come easily to me. . . . As I began living with people like Raphael and Philip, I began to see the hardness of my heart. . . . Raphael and the others were crying out simply for friendship and I did not quite know how to respond because of the other forces within me, pulling me to go up the ladder. . . . They have been teaching me that behind the need for me to win, there are my own fears and anguish, the fear of being devalued or pushed aside, the fear of opening up my heart and of being vulnerable or of

feeling helpless in front of others in pain; there is the pain and brokenness of my own heart.

I discovered something which I had never confronted before, that there were immense forces of darkness and hatred within my own heart.⁸

Vanier's journey to grow in love forced him to confront the evil and hardness within his own heart. Nonetheless, out of his brokenness, God met him and taught him that love is more than simply doing things for people; it is revealing "to them their beauty and value." May God meet you and teach you this same powerful truth as you seek to love others this day.

Question to Consider

Whose beauty might you be bypassing because you are too busy or distracted?

Prayer

Lord, when I consider that love is revealing to others their beauty and value, the hardness of my heart reveals itself. Forgive and cleanse me. Help me to truly love others, to say to them through my attitude, "You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself." Please make me like you so I might love those around me the way you do. In Jesus' name, amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

DAY 2 MORNING/MIDDAY OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:20b–32

But while he [the younger brother] was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. . . . The father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. . . .”

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. “Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

Devotional

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we learn that whenever we wander from the love of the Father, we are lost. We see this in the younger son who rebelled against his father and ran away from home. We also see it in the elder brother who remained obedient to the Father but was equally lost. He too had wandered from the love of the Father. As Henri Nouwen has written:

The lostness of the elder son . . . is much harder to identify. After all, he did all the right things. He was obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, and hardworking. . . . Outwardly, the elder son was faultless. But when confronted by his father's joy at the return of his younger brother, a dark power erupts in him and boils to the surface. . . .

There are many elder sons and elder daughters who are lost while still at home. And it is this lostness—characterized by judgment and condemnation, anger and resentment, bitterness and jealousy—that is so pernicious and damaging to the human heart. . . . There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding “sin.” . . .

I recognize the elder son in me. Often I catch myself complaining about little rejections, little impolitenesses, little negligences. Time and again I discover within me that murmuring, whining, grumbling, lamenting, and griping that go on and on even against my will.⁹

Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son reminds us how quickly and easily we can become the elder brother—bitter, judgmental, grumbling, jealous, and proud. It also offers one of the most vivid pictures in Scripture of the love of God, a love that invites us to turn to him over and over again, all day and every day.

Question to Consider

In what areas of life might your pursuit of “getting things done” or “doing right things” be more important to you than seeking a loving relationship with God and others?

Prayer

Father, it is so easy for me get lost in anger, resentment, or jealousy of others, and fail to hear your voice of love calling me home. Melt away my resentments and unforgiveness toward others with your love. And free me to love others with your love. In Jesus' name, amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

DAY 2 MIDDAY/EVENING OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:42–44; 5:15

At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was,

they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea. . . .

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Devotional

On April 9, 1945, German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed for his resistance to Hitler’s Nazi regime. During his years of resistance, he penned these famous words in his book *Life Together*:

Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community. Such people will only do harm to themselves and to the community. Alone you stood before God when God called you. Alone you had to obey God’s voice. Alone you had to take up your cross, had to struggle and pray, and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot avoid yourself; for it is precisely God has singled you out. . . .

But the reverse is also true: *Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone.* You are called into the community of faith; the call was not meant for you alone. . . . You are not alone, even when you die. . . . If you neglect the community of other Christians, you reject the

call of Jesus Christ, and thus your being alone can only be harmful for you.¹⁰

Bonhoeffer warns us that when we do not take time to be alone in God's presence, we become dangerous or harmful to others. We may demand people meet our needs for love, approval, and self-worth—a weight too heavy for them to bear. We may feed off others in inappropriate ways and cause damage. We need people, but they can never fully fill us with the perfect love that can only be given by God. For this reason, it is vital that we consistently practice silence and stillness with God.

Question to Consider

Consider your present balance between solitude and community. To what degree is it adequate for you to be growing in love for God, others, and yourself?

Prayer

Lord, I confess to you that I am not sure I can discern the appropriate balance of solitude and community at this juncture of my life. I ask you to lead me on this journey. Help me to be intentional in pursuing both stillness with you and engagement in healthy community with others. I ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

DAY 3 MORNING/MIDDAY OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: 1 John 4:10, 15–16, 18a

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . . If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. . . . There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.

Devotional

For the apostle John, learning to live in the immensity of the love of God is the power and source from which we love others. God's love is always first. Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and theologian (1813–1855), summed it up well:

You have loved us first, O God, alas! We speak of it in terms of history as if You loved us first but a single time, rather than that without ceasing You have loved us first many times and every day and our whole life through. When we wake up in the morning and turn our soul toward You—You are there first—You have loved us first; if I rise at dawn and at that same second turn my soul toward You in prayer,

You are there ahead of me, You have loved me first. When I withdraw from the distractions of the day and turn my soul toward You, You are there first and thus forever. And we speak ungratefully as if You have loved us first only once.¹¹

Kierkegaard captures for us a glimpse of the extraordinary nature of the love of God. So often we think we are waiting on God when the truth is that he is waiting on us. God is more different from us than the human mind is capable of grasping. His love is without strings and without conditions. He simply loves human beings, and there is nothing we can do, or not do, that will change that love. We will spend eternity in awe and wonder of this love that surpasses knowledge, a love so great that God became a human being in Jesus to die for our sins.

Question to Consider

What difference might it make in your day to remember that, in every moment you turn your heart to God—including this very moment—he is waiting for you and loving you first?

Prayer

Lord, open up and expand the container of my heart to receive the depth and breadth of your love that surpasses knowledge and flows toward me every moment of every day. And may your love then flow through me to those around me today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

DAY 3 MIDDAY/EVENING OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: Luke 10:38–42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Devotional

This familiar story of Martha and Mary teaches us why it is essential to slow down to sit at the feet of Jesus if we are to love others well.

Martha is completely caught up in the demands of preparing an important meal for some very distinguished guests: Jesus and his twelve disciples. Among other things, her to-do list includes shopping for ingredients; setting a large table; prepping food; borrowing additional mats, tables, and serving plates from neighbors; cleaning the house; serving the meal; and perhaps most importantly, making sure everything goes perfectly.

But Martha is resentful, especially at her sister Mary, who sits idly by enjoying the company of Jesus. Martha is too distracted and irritated to enjoy her guests or Jesus. In trying to accomplish too much, she not only loses sight of herself but of the very purpose of all her hard work—to welcome and care for her guests, including Christ himself.

Question to Consider

Think back over the last few days. In what way(s) did your to-do list, distractibility, or perfectionism keep you from loving and enjoying Jesus or the people around you?

Prayer

Lord, help me to honor my own boundaries and limits in doing for others so that I don't become resentful. And teach me to slow down, stop, and sit at your feet in stillness that I might love others in ways that reflect you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

DAY 4 MORNING/MIDDAY OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:1–5

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Devotional

A synonym for the word *judge* is *despise*. It happens when we harden our heart toward someone. In the context of Matthew 7, the issue with judgment is not discernment of good and evil, right or wrong, but the condemnation of "writing someone off."

Anthony the Great (254–356 AD) is perhaps the earliest and most significant teacher among the Christian desert fathers. He wrote:

Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we win our brother, we win God. If we cause our brother to stumble, we have sinned against Christ.¹²

When Anthony refers to death with our neighbor, he means that we renounce our right to pronounce judgment over them—a challenge difficult enough to be described as a death.

Theodore of Pherme, another prominent fourth-century desert father, went so far as to say that a mature, nonjudgmental love toward others is the foundational virtue or character quality upon which all others are built:

There is no other virtue than that of not being scornful [despising anyone].¹³

Maximus the Confessor (580–662 AD), a Christian theologian, monk, and advisor to the emperor of Constantinople, captured this truth through another lens:

Interior freedom is not possessed by anyone who cannot close his eyes to the fault of a friend, whether real or apparent.¹⁴

The early desert fathers understood that it is impossible to think about the spiritual life apart from living in loving community with others. They emphasized that genuine spirituality is marked by a humility that seeks to hide the faults of others rather than expose them, and that the nearer we draw to God in love, the nearer we are drawn in love to our neighbor. They understood that when we harden our hearts to another person, we harden our hearts to Christ.

Question to Consider

In what subtle or perhaps even unconscious ways might you be judging or despising someone in your life?

Prayer

Father, I fear that my tendency to look down on and judge others is so much a part of me that I scarcely notice it. Grant

me an awareness, by the Holy Spirit, of when my tone of voice, facial expressions, words, or actions fail to communicate safety, acceptance, or tenderness to those around me. In Jesus' name, amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

DAY 4 MIDDAY/EVENING OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: Mark 14:3–6

While he [Jesus] was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.

“Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.”

Devotional

Pedro Arrupe (1907–1991) left medical school and a promising career to join the Jesuits in 1927, but in 1945 his medical training was put to use when he led the first rescue team into

Hiroshima, Japan, after the atomic bomb was dropped on that city. He offers us insight into the power of the love of Jesus to transform all we do:

Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.¹⁵

The woman who anointed Jesus with the alabaster jar of perfume was not preoccupied with what others thought of her. Christ's love and forgiveness had, in Arrupe's words, already "decided everything." Her heart brimmed over with thankfulness to Jesus for his love and mercy. She understood that her significance came from her relationship to Jesus, not from the approval of others. This gave her confidence to be herself, regardless of what others might think about her.

Question to Consider

In your own life, how might it be true that falling in love with Jesus and staying in love with Jesus will decide everything? How could it change you, as well as your relationships?

Prayer

*I arise today through the strength of heaven;
Light of sun, radiance of moon,
Splendor of fire, speed of lightning,
Swiftmess of wind, depth of sea,
Stability of earth, firmness of rock.*

*I arise today through God's strength to pilot me . . .
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me . . .*

*I summon today all these powers between me and evil,
Against every cruel, merciless power that
may oppose my body and soul.*

—Attributed to Saint Patrick, 500 AD

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

DAY 5 MORNING/MIDDAY OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: Luke 17:11–19

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

Devotional

God repeatedly invites us to cultivate gratitude—not just with an occasional prayer, but as a way of life. Consider just a few of the psalmists’ many commands to be thankful:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. (Psalm 107:1)

Sacrifice thank offerings to God. . . . Those who sacrifice thank offerings honor me. (Psalm 50:14, 23)

Let us come before him with thanksgiving. (Psalm 95:2)

The problem is that we so easily take things for granted. At times, we even feel entitled. We expect, and sometimes even demand, that things in life go our way. Yet God invites us to give thanks for the big and small gifts that come into our lives each day. Why? We all depend—in every detail and moment of life—on him.

“Blessed is he who expects nothing,” said Francis of Assisi, “for he shall enjoy everything.” Francis understood that none of us can earn the beauty of a star in the sky or a sunset on the horizon, that our utter dependence on God is the very rock of reality. Irish poet and author John O’Donohue put it this way: “Because we are so engaged with the world, we usually forget how fragile life can be and how vulnerable we always are. It takes only a couple of seconds for a life to change irreversibly.”¹⁶

One of the great wonders of life is that, when we make gratitude—expressing appreciations—a way of life, God changes not only us but also our relationships and the communities in which we participate, including family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and brothers and sisters in Christ.

Question to Consider

What two or three things from the past week are you most thankful for? (For example, good health or healing, people in your life, possessions, opportunities, trials, closed doors, spiritual blessings, etc.) Express your heartfelt gratitude to God for these gifts.

Prayer

Father, it is easy for me to walk around with a sense of entitlement and forget how fragile life is, how everything is a gift. Even as I live in a culture of striving and anxiety, teach me gratefulness and contentment—in everything and for everything. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

DAY 5 MIDDAY/EVENING OFFICE

Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading: Genesis 4:2–8

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Devotional

The story of Cain and Abel illustrates our need to grow in love for God and for our neighbor at the same time. Cain’s broken relationship with God leads to a broken relationship with his brother Abel.

Jesus summarized the entire Bible in one simple, powerful truth:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37–40)

Five hundred years later, monk and abbot Dorotheus of Gaza pointed out that, much like the spokes in a wheel—which are separate but meet at the center—the closer we draw to God in love, the more we will be united to our neighbor.

In the sixteenth century, Teresa of Avila wrote:

There are only two duties that our Lord requires of us: the love of God, and the love of our neighbor. And, in my opinion, the surest sign for our discovering our love to God is discovering our love to our neighbor. Be assured that the further you advance in the love of your neighbor, the more you are advancing in the love of God.¹⁷

The temptation to separate our love for God from our love for a neighbor has been with us since the beginning of time. But as Jesus taught, *the heart of genuine spirituality is love of God and others.*

Question to Consider

What is your biggest challenge in integrating these two loves in this season of your life?

Prayer

Father, I find it so much easier to be with you than to deal with tensions and conflicts in my relationships with other human beings. I open the door of my heart to you, fully and wide. Fill me with the Holy Spirit and help me to grow today into an emotionally mature adult who loves well. In Jesus' name, amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)