

# Open the Eyes of My Heart

The Rev. Glenda  
Simpkins Hoffman

Psalm 141

**Sermon Series:**  
**Pray Daily: Igniting**  
**Our Passion for God**

***Our culture values hurry, busyness, materialism and individualism. These are enemies of our soul that can rob the abundant life Jesus came to give.***

The question that is posed today for our sermon topic is, “Do I have to pray with my eyes closed?” While closing our eyes is not necessary to pray, it can help shut out distractions and enable us to focus on God. This morning, I really want to reframe the question and ask, in the words of the song we sang earlier, “How do we open the eyes of our hearts to God?” How do we shut out the distractions—even temptations—that draw us away in order to orient our lives toward God?

I chose Psalm 141 initially because the psalmist makes two references to body posture—lifting his hands and turning his eyes toward God. But there is so much more in this Psalm that I really needed to hear this week. It’s been a difficult week for me, with more to do than I could actually accomplish. We’re still trying to get our house organized. I have a beloved husband and two small children who need my time and attention. There are so many ministry details to attend to here, especially with the start of the fall season. There is more to do than I feel I can do and temptations to work longer and harder and to do more and more. And I confess, I went home one night and thought, “I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if I’m going to survive this transition and this new minis-

try in this very large church.” I share that with you, not for your sympathy, but because I know many of you are experiencing those same feelings—with kids going off to college or starting school next week, and all the other activities that resume in this next month.

There is a word for us today. Psalm 141 is a lament, or complaint, prayer for help. It was written at a time when there were real enemies who wanted to do harm, and there was a real temptation to simply conclude, in effect, “If you can’t beat them, then join them.” The temptation was to succumb to the cultural norms that were against God rather than stand up in the midst of them. The psalmist prays for, and apparently finds, the strength to reject the temptations of the wicked and their outward prosperity and to live in humble dependence upon God.

This is a timely word for us because we, too, live in a culture that has real enemies. Our culture values hurry, busyness, materialism and individualism. These are enemies of our soul that can rob the abundant life Jesus came to give. Someone said to me this week, “Don’t let the Northern Virginia culture eat you up.” That scares me. How do we resist the temptation to succumb to our culture? How do we practically orient our lives toward God?

***“Silence is a reversal of the whole possessing, controlling, grasping dynamic of trying to maintain control of our own existence. Silence is the inner act of letting go.”***

- Robert Mulholland Jr.

One of my favorite passages is Matthew 11:28-30. And Eugene Peterson’s translation in *The Message*, is especially compelling as we hear Jesus words: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”

This is a “how to” sermon. What I will share with you today is not a formula but practical ideas that help us learn the unforced rhythms of grace as we practice letting go and letting God. The way to open the eyes of our heart is to let go or resist temptations and to let God as we practice a corresponding discipline. Please understand that these practices are not the end goal but a means by which we can make space in our busy, hectic, hurried lives so that we can experience God’s presence and the abundant life Jesus promised us. These, of course, are not the only spiritual disciplines, but I think they are the ones often neglected and the ones that we need for dealing with the temptations of our culture.

First, we open the eyes of our hearts as we resist the temptation to use words to control and we practice silence. Psalm 141:3 says, “Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.” It’s difficult to talk without sinning. Words are often used to control and distort the truth. In the political climate in which we live here in the D.C. area, we

experience the power of words to hype, exaggerate and spin, but this happens in our families and in our work places as well.

However, silence is more than the absence of speech and sound. Robert Mulholland Jr. writes, “The practice of silence is the radical reversal of our cultural tendencies. Silence is bringing ourselves to a point of relinquishing to God our control of our relationship with God. Silence is a reversal of the whole possessing, controlling, grasping dynamic of trying to maintain control of our own existence. Silence is the inner act of letting go.” Closely related to the discipline of silence is the discipline of solitude. This week, I heard a wonderful quote by the great Christian physicist Blaisé Pascal: “All human evil comes from a single cause, man's inability to sit still in a room.”

That is probably true. The discipline of solitude provides the freedom not only to sit still in a room but also to be alone, not in order to be away from people but in order to hear the divine whisper better. Solitude helps us to see the reality of our lives—the brokenness, distortion, darkness that is often covered up. Solitude allows us the space to be who we really are with God and acknowledge who we are to ourselves and God. In solitude, we offer ourselves to God to be transformed.

Jesus is our model. He lived an active life. People made constant demands on him. In the middle of such a busy life, Jesus somehow found the opportunity to get away

***If you and I want to orient our lives toward God and live in God's will, we, too, must learn to ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives.***

from the pressure to be alone, to pray, to spend time with his Father to gain perspective, to be renewed, to regenerate his energy. If he needed that, then certainly we do, too.

As a mother of young children and a pastor, I know the challenge of finding this time, but I also know how absolutely critical it is. So, I try to make sure I get up early enough to have some time before everyone else awakens. When I rock my baby to sleep, I linger for awhile and enjoy some time with God. I seek to observe Sabbath and to spend some extended time in Silence and Solitude, and then, three or four times a year, I withdraw for even longer periods on retreat. As sleep and rest are needed each day for the body, so silence and solitude are needed each day for the soul.

Another way we open the eyes of our hearts is to resist the temptation of hurry and practice slowing. In his book, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg shares the story of asking a spiritual director what he needed to do to be spiritually healthy. After a long pause, the spiritual director responded, "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." Ortberg said, "Okay, I've written that one down. That's a good one. Now what else is there?" He writes, "I had many things to do, and this was a long-distance conversation, so I was anxious to cram as many units of spiritual wisdom into the least amount of time possible." Another long pause. "There is nothing else. You must

ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." If you and I want to orient our lives toward God and live in God's will, we, too, must learn to ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives.

Have you ever noticed, while reading through the Gospels, that Jesus is never in a hurry? The second person of the Trinity, God in the flesh, the Redeemer of the world, never appeared to be hurried or distressed. He knew he had time to do the Father's will. This is very convictive to me, because I am often in a hurry. If we're honest with ourselves, most of us hurry through life, trying to accomplish more in less time.

Slowing is the discipline of engaging in activities that will help us overcome inner hurriedness and the addiction to busyness. What are some practices that will help us to get away, overcome a sense of hurriedness and slow down? In her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Adele Calhoun shares these ideas:

- Intentionally drive in the slow lane or choose the longest line at the grocery store or bank.
- Look people in the eyes and speak more slowly.
- Chew your food more deliberately rather than swallowing it only half chewed.
- Sit at the table and linger over a meal.
- Plan buffer times between meetings.
- Get enough sleep. Sleep is a good indicator of how much we trust God.

All of these practices will help liberate us from drivenness. The

***The central point for the discipline of simplicity is to seek the Kingdom of God and the righteousness of His kingdom first, and then everything necessary will come in its proper order.***

goal is not simply to slow down but to help us live the present moment to the fullest, so that we can realize the care and patience of a God who is never in a hurry. The work of the Spirit is not the work of an “instant.” I encourage you to think about your life and begin to practice the discipline of slowing in various ways that are helpful and meaningful to you, so that you can eliminate hurry from your life and experience the presence of God more fully.

Another way we open the eyes of our hearts is to resist the temptation of materialism and practice simplicity. Look at Psalm 141:4. “Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies.” Do you realize that millions of dollars are spent daily by advertisers who want to convince us to “eat...their delicacies” or to drink the coolest beverage or to drive the hottest car? We are daily bombarded with messages that happiness consists in the abundance of possessions. Materialism is a reality in our culture. We, as Americans, are addicted to having things.

In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says this: “Because we lack a divine Center, our need for security has led us into an insane attachment to things. We really must understand that the lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic.... We crave things we neither need nor enjoy. We buy things we do not want to impress people we do not like. We are made to feel

ashamed to wear clothes or drive cars until they are worn out. The mass media have convinced us that to be out of step with fashion is to be out of step with reality. It is time we awaken to the fact that conformity to a sick society is to be sick. Until we see how unbalanced our culture has become at this point, we will not be able to deal with the mammon spirit within ourselves nor will we desire Christian simplicity.” We need to understand that Jesus declared war on the materialism of his day. And I would suggest that he declares war on the materialism of our day, as well.

Let me be clear. God intends that we should have adequate material provision. Scripture declares consistently and forcefully that the creation is good and to be enjoyed. The central point for the discipline of simplicity is to seek the Kingdom of God and the righteousness of His kingdom first, and then everything necessary will come in its proper order. Jesus made clear that freedom from anxiety is one of the inward evidences of seeking first the kingdom of God. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that our “stuff” causes us a lot of anxiety and costs not only money but time—getting the stuff, taking care of the stuff, fixing the stuff, and even getting rid of the stuff. I know of the cost of having stuff, because I’ve been dealing with stuff for the past six months in moving it from Chicago to Vienna. Believe me, I’m speaking to myself here, too, and I am longing for more simplicity. So what can we do? Foster gives some suggestions:

***“Sabbath fulfilled in human life is really celebration of God.... When we come to the place where we can joyously do no work, it will be because God is so exalted in our minds and bodies that we can trust Him with our life and our world and can take our hands off of them.”***

- Dallas Willard

- Buy things for their usefulness rather than for their status.
- Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you—alcohol, coffee, tea, pop, chocolate, television, newspapers, books, etc.
- Develop a habit of giving things away.
- Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry. Timesaving devices almost never save time, so resist them.
- Learn to enjoy things without owning them.
- Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation.
- Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the Kingdom of God.

Simplicity is a discipline that is highly countercultural, but it does open us to God in ways that we need desperately in our day.

Another way we open the eyes of our hearts is to resist the temptation of workaholism and to practice Sabbath. To “keep the Sabbath holy” means to recognize that the rhythm of six days of work and one day of ceasing work is written into the very core of our beings. God breathes Sabbath into the very fabric of creation as He Himself rests on the seventh day (Genesis 2:1-2). Keeping the Sabbath holy becomes the fourth of the Ten Commandments.

John Calvin stated that the commandment to keep Sabbath reflects God’s genuine concern for God’s people. He writes,

“Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse, not a blessing.... On the

Sabbath, we cease our work so God can do His work in us... Sabbath keeping is a way of living out our belief that we are not our own; that we belong to God.”

From its beginning, Sabbath has declared that the Living God is the one source and aim of all our lives. Not possessions. Not the striving after them. Not dominance over other human beings. Sabbath keeping is the least obeyed among Christians of the Ten Commandments, and one has to wonder why. Perhaps our observance or lack of observance of this discipline may be a good indicator of whether we trust God or our own self-efforts.

Dallas Willard writes, “Sabbath fulfilled in human life is really celebration of God.... When we come to the place where we can joyously do no work, it will be because God is so exalted in our minds and bodies that we can trust Him with our life and our world and can take our hands off of them.”

Here’s a question for you. Are you able to trust God and take your hands off your work for one day in seven in order to observe Sabbath? It’s a gift God wants you to have. Will you receive it?

Finally, we open the eyes of our hearts as we resist the temptation of individualism and isolation and practice spiritual friendship. Notice Psalm 141: Let the righteous strike me; let the faithful correct me.” There is a longing for real, authentic relationships with people who are willing to stand up, speak the truth in love, and help hold the psalmist accountable to follow God.

***“Are you tired?  
Worn out?  
Burned out?  
Come to me.  
Get away with  
me and you’ll  
recover your  
life. I’ll show  
you how to take  
a real rest.  
Walk with me  
and work with  
me—watch how  
I do it. Learn  
the unforced  
rhythms of  
grace.”***

- Matthew 11 from  
*The Message*

We all need to share the journey with others. We need to be in relationships with people where we are known, loved, celebrated and served and where we can know, love, celebrate and serve others. Many in this church have those kinds of relationships, but some of us don’t. Because I’m still new here, I feel the need to cultivate those kinds of relationships. Finding a small group, or a spiritual friend, or prayer partner needs to be one of my top priorities in the coming year. And it may be yours as well.

After sharing all this information and ideas for making open the eyes of our hearts, your immediate response may be “That would be nice...but I don’t have time.” You may wonder, given your busy lives, how you can afford to practice them. But I challenge you, as I am even now challenging myself, to consider this Dallas Willard question: “How we can afford not to?” It will cost us some time and require us to change some habits and even priorities to practice these disciplines. But practicing these disciplines is not the goal. Rather, the fruit is to open the eyes of our hearts to see God for who He really is, to hear His voice, experience His presence, so that we can experience His love, and joy, and peace.... To not practice these God-ordained disciplines will mean we will have more time to do whatever it is we think we need to do, but it will cost us love, and joy and peace. In short, it will cost exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring.

I’ll close with Jesus’ invitation from Matthew 11: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”

