



## Dr. James C. Howell eThings Christians Do

### **eThingsChristiansDo – observe Holy Week**

Our eThingsChristiansDo series is over – at least for now! Any thoughts you have on what we've covered, or left uncovered, would be of great value to me. Thank you, as always for reading.

Perhaps the most crucial thing Christians do is to worship, and to mark time in light of the story of Jesus. No time is more fraught with meaning than Holy Week. What do Christians do? They observe Holy Week. Beginning Sunday, we pay close attention, in our minds and also in our hearts, to the last week of Jesus' life. Each day of that week, Jesus was somewhere, doing something of ultimate importance, teaching, acting, loving, suffering, combating evil, defeating death.

These are days of obligation for Christians. We worship on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday – and every day in our homes, and in our souls. I will send emails, beginning on Sunday, to walk us through what Jesus was doing each day. I hope you will read, and take the time to consider the immense love of God in Christ, the startling display of the power of God in Christ, and to discover our destiny in his story.

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### **eThingsChristiansDo – serve (part 3)**

Yesterday we said that the beginning of service is to look to your giftedness, the abilities and passions God installed in you. But if we focus only on our strengths, we miss the deeper secret, the fuller joy, of life with God.

If you want to be close to God, if you want to find fulfillment and serve God, look to the place inside where you have been wounded. In that wounded place, you will find your calling, the ultimate mission God has placed you on earth to fulfill. Do not be afraid of your brokenness, for cracks let the light in, or as Hemingway put it, "The world breaks everyone, and then some become strong in the broken places."

In your broken places, you will discover the most lovely giftedness. In your broken places, you will meet the brokenness of others, and you will be able to touch them, because you know, you remember. It's all about finding and living as near as possible to that intersection between your life story and what God is doing to heal the brokenness of the world.

The best Bible stories feature God using the weak one, the unlikely candidate, the one nobody would place a bet on: the lad David against Goliath (1 Samuel 17), Gideon with his puny army (Judges 7), Moses who can only stammer (Exodus 4), Jeremiah who's just a teenager (Jeremiah 1), the disciples who are frightened fishermen (Matthew 4, John 20), and even Jesus, poor, isolated, crucified (1 Corinthians 1:18-31). God spoke to Paul and said, "My strength is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Not "My strength is perfected when I top off your impressive resumé." It's about God, not us; and the miracle of grace is that God not only can but really prefers to use our inability, our foibles, our awkwardness, our wounds.

So serving becomes a voyage of discovery, a journey to healing, a quest of dependence upon God. You stretch, you get out of your comfort zone, you try something about which you are clueless; you try the hardest possible thing, knowing you may fail. You probably will – and that may be the best thing that's happened to you in a long time. God honors our trust in God, risking something for God, climbing out on a limb for God, acknowledging it's not about me and my grand abilities, but it's all about God, who can use even me in unlikely ways, even in my failure. And then I find a healing purpose to the hurts I have sustained, to the wounds I carry secretly inside.

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## eThingsChristiansDo – serve (part 2)

How do I begin to serve? How do I continue to serve but more faithfully? What is God calling me to next?

We begin by looking in the mirror and asking “What did God wire into me in that secret factory where people are created?” What is special in you? Or what strength do you have that many people have, but you have it too? A passion for Mozart? A head for numbers? A flair for pastry crusts? A sparkling smile? Can you sew? Remember names or count cards? Fix broken things? Write poetry? Throw a great party? Sing in the shower?

As I wrote in my little [book on the Holy Spirit](#), “Sometimes the world has tried to extinguish our God-given fire, through the grind of daily drudgery, a brutal boss, a cold parent, as the devil never grows weary in his routine of whispering negatives in the ears of God’s precious children. Like many Christian heroes of centuries gone by, we may have to get rude when those whisperings come, and shout at the darkness ‘I am gifted by the Holy Spirit. Yes, even me!’”

Many churches use spiritual gift inventories to help us discover what God-given gifts we have to be set to use. At our Church we have a brilliant program called [Wired 4 Ministry](#) – and indeed, we are all wired to be ministers! If we want to be close to God, if we crave fulfillment in life, then we must first look to whatever little or big skill we have, lift our heads in gratitude to the Spirit, and then confess “My life is not my own.

Use me as you will.” The gifts the Spirit yearns to have at its disposal may be something as grand as Millard Fuller figuring out how to build Habitat homes around the world for the working poor, or something just as precious as my grandmother wiping my feverish forehead with a cool cloth when I was a sick little boy.

What if we don’t listen to the message of the gifts God has planted in us? We can coast along, of course, but we sense some gnawing hollowness inside, a vague sense that something is missing, that all is not as it should be; God may seem to be nothing more than an idea, a relic in a museum, and I keep getting a busy signal when I phone God. When we let ourselves be used by the Spirit, surprises are in store. [Jürgen Moltmann](#) writes that believers “put their natural gifts and powers at the service of the Church. But in the service of the Church they make out of their gifts something different from what they were in other contexts. And then new powers develop in them, powers which they were unaware of previously.”

There is another even more stunning surprise we’ll consider tomorrow...

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## eThingsChristiansDo – serve (part 1)

The brother of Jesus encouraged us to be “doers, not just hearers of the Word” (James 1:22); he went on to say “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:17). We have a bad habit of very conveniently transmuting Christianity into something “spiritual,” which then becomes “invisible.” Did Jesus come so we could feel different? or so we might be different? And doesn’t that difference issue in tangible action?

Christians serve. Serving is not optional, it is not for one segment of my life span, it is not something others in the Church or professionals do on my behalf. Serving is a constant staple of the life of every Christian. If you begin to say “It does no good,” or “They should help themselves,” or “I’ll wait until I’m retired,” or “I gave a ham at Christmas,” the devil is whispering to you again. John Wesley spoke of “the doctrine of the devil” – which is “I do good when I feel like it.”

People say “I feel good when I serve.” Perhaps – although the service to which God calls you might not feel good at all; it might be utterly daunting, exasperating, inconvenient. In fact, God probably calls each of us to something daunting, exasperating, inconvenient. That’s exactly how Jesus felt when he was wandering around Galilee and Jerusalem trying to do good.

But don’t non-Christians serve? Is there anything special about Christianity and service? We back off from common notions – like “volunteering.” Yes, we try to get people to volunteer! But if I volunteer, the assumption is I am giving

my time. But with this mentality, don't I still put myself at the center, as if I am a little potentate ruling my own life? My time is God's, God is the power to whom I am responsive.

And Jesus taught us a new way of looking. When the world sees someone who is poor, homeless, or hungry, the world pities her, or blames him, or brushes a few crumbs off the table thinking the recipient should be grateful. When the Christian sees someone who is poor, homeless, or hungry, we see Jesus, who was poor, homeless, and hungry. We reach out to the poor, not out of pity but out of love, out of brotherhood, sisterhood. We learn to see ourselves in the face of the poor, discovering our own poverty of soul within. The Christian never feels like a "have" helping the "have-nots." Christian service is the opposite of paternalism; the Christians experiences genuine humility in the thick of service.

When I care for the needy, I love God. When I am too busy to care for the needy, I am too busy for God. When I postpone serving, I build a massive block wall between myself and God. I may still have uplifting spiritual feelings inside, but faith without works is still very dead, no matter how warm and fuzzy such a hollow faith thinks it may feel.

Read Jesus' last sermon (Matthew 25:31-46) – the one he preached right before he died for us. Very clearly, we will not be judged by our education, investment portfolios, or how much fun we've had. We will be judged by whether we fed the hungry, and welcomed the person nobody else wanted.

What other reply can there be to the cynicism and disbelief in our culture? [G.K. Chesterton](#) once remarked that the problem is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting; it has hardly ever been tried.

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## **eThingsChristiansDo – generosity**

In Marilynne Robinson's wonderful novel, *Gilead*, a man boasts that his grandfather "never kept anything that was worth giving away, or let us keep it either. He would take laundry right off the line. I believe he was a saint of some kind. When he left us, we all felt his absence bitterly. There was an innocence in him. He lacked patience for anything but the plainest interpretations of the starkest commandments, 'To him who asks, give,' in particular."

Generosity is not in vogue; generosity is counter-cultural. Generosity requires an innocence, and a keen interest in Jesus' commandments, however stark.

Why is generosity elusive? Even though we are the wealthiest, most comfortable people who have ever lived on this planet, we are plagued by a sense of scarcity, an almost irrational fear that I never have quite enough, or no matter how much I have it might evaporate tomorrow, so I store up, I expend on me - and hey, I have earned it, I deserve it, it's mine. Luxuries are deemed necessities, things we merely want seem as essential as oxygen or water.

What would it be like, to be freed by the Spirit so that we no longer cling, grasp or consume, but share, open up, and give generously? Jesus said, "Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8). How generous has God been, with sunshine, the breath you just took, the miracle of vision and thought, the symphony of nature, people who have put up with you, and most splendidly the love of Jesus, who was not stingy or calculating but gave up his very life for me and for you?

Generosity begins in the recognition that we have received freely, that whatever happens to be labeled as "mine" really belongs to "God," who loaned it to me so I could enjoy the delicious pleasure of giving it away. In worship we collect the "[offering](#)," but it should really be called the "returning." Have you experienced the peculiar delight of giving with abandon, not calculating, risking something for God?

"You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity" (2 Corinthians 9:11) – but Paul doesn't intend us to sleazily calculate that "if I give more to God, I'll make even more money..." The enrichment is the well-lived life, being in sync with God.

If you want to be close to God, be generous. Generosity grows the way we eat peanuts or potato chips: you can't eat

just one. You are generous - with your money, with your time, with your talent - and before you know it you are more generous.

Generosity does not ask tough questions about the recipient of the generosity. Jesus simply said, "To him who asks, give" (Matthew 5:42). Mother Teresa cared for the poorest, and clarified that "We do not ask why they are poor; we simply love them, we love Jesus in loving them." Indeed, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7), not a calculating giver, not a giver who insists on measured results. Generosity is "an unmeasured willingness to give. It is a warm, delightful, instinctive self-spending for God and others. It is the uncalculated response to all that is asked" ([Evelyn Underhill](#)).

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## **eThingsChristiansDo – patience**

As I look over this series on "the things Christians do," I am struck by how many of them involve moments of not doing, a relinquishing of the urgency of what I do, engaging in the more arduous labor of doing nothing instead of doing something.

Christians do patience, although to the outsider it appears to be the opposite of doing. The very mention of "patience" makes me impatient; perhaps I have diagnosed myself as someone who will never be patient. I simply must make things happen now, I must be productive now, I must know the answer now – but why? All good things take time, the best wine has sat on a rack doing nothing for years, the grey-headed (or bald) people laugh at what seemed panicky some time back.

Impatience bristles because we harbor an absurd possessiveness about time, as if "my" day has only so many nanoseconds for me to "spend," and so love or prayer or peace or joy or anything else that is good but requires stillness feels like an intrusion. The tyranny of the clock tightens its noose ever more tightly as technology heightens our silly fantasy about how much can be crammed into "my" day.

But if time is a gift from God, and if God is the intrusion, if love, prayer and doing good are open doors into new life, then patience is the way to life, joy, peace. We laugh off society's insistence on the quick fix, and we settle in for the long haul of growth, the way an acorn prepares itself to become a tall oak.

To have a relationship of any depth requires patience - and I require some, too. Patience "bears evenly all that is uneven; until it is established, we don't really love" (Evelyn Underhill). Without patience we never connect with God – who after all, is patient with me.

The root of the word "patience" means "to suffer, to bear" - and is the same word as to be "a patient." What does a patient do? A patient suffers, waits, yields control to somebody else. Patience is about being God's patient: not flying off on my own to construct a happy life, but getting quiet enough long enough to hear God say "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Impatience really is nothing but self-absorption: when I am frantic, angry, resentful, hard, impatient, I am putting myself at the center, instead of God, who is the Center of everything.

Fortunately, God is not in any hurry - so the closer we are to God, the less frantically rushed, the more calmly patient, we can be. The patient aren't habitually tardy, and the patient aren't passive. Rather, the patient are those who hang solidly on to God no matter the circumstances; the patient move at God's pace.

But you can't just decide I'll be patient! You will fall flat on your face. Patience is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and so you shove back your old self, you hide the clocks, and you pray for patience. Then you begin to notice it manifesting itself, and nobody is more surprised than you.

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## **eThingsChristiansDo – solitude**

We are a lonely people, no matter how many parties we're invited to, no matter how long our list of acquaintances who might even relish our company. At the beginning of her famous diary, Anne Frank wrote, "No one will believe that a girl of thirteen feels herself quite alone in the world. I have strings of friends, a good home - no, I don't seem to lack anything. But it's the same with all my friends, just fun and joking, nothing more. The root of the problem is this: I have no real friend."

We are lonely, even in a crowd of smiling faces, because we do not know solitude. Jesus was never really lonely, although the Gospels repeatedly tell us that "He went up on the mountain by himself to pray" (Matthew 14:23). Solitude is when we separate ourselves from the crowd to be alone – with our selves, our thoughts, and God. We need solitude, which we discover is not being alone at all. The person who cultivates a holy solitude is never afraid to be alone; and in fact, the one who grasps the heart of solitude is the one truly able to be with people, all kinds of people, and in creative, refreshing, not draining, exhausting ways.

Martin Luther King thought about the shortcomings of desegregation, which are the same as the perils of never knowing solitude. "Desegregation is empty and shallow. Our ultimate goal is integration; desegregation is only a first step. Integration is creative, the welcomed participation of others, genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing. A desegregated society that is not integrated leads to physical proximity without spiritual affinity. It gives us a society where elbows are together and hearts are apart."

Our socializing can be empty and shallow; we rub elbows, but our hearts are checked when we come in the door. The key to our hearts gravitating toward each other, and knowing God together, is being alone. In solitude, we realize who we are, and Whose we are, and having enjoyed some distance, we then have something to share, something won on the field of solitude with God.

What do Christians do? They cultivate a quiet solitude, a holy heart, listening to God, to my memories, my dreams, my deeper yearnings that get drowned out by the decibels of a crowded restaurant or ballgame. Then my solitude lingers when I am back in the thick of coworkers and family and pals, like a compass that keeps me oriented no matter how much I get tugged on or jostled.

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## **eThingsChristiansDo – simplicity**

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free, 'tis the gift to come down where we ought to be... When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed. So goes the old Shaker song – and we may contemplate simplicity with some curious mix of nostalgia and longing, as we find simplicity to be ridiculous and yet alluring.

In our culture where more = better, where rushing to cram 39 things into a day seems more fulfilling than to calm our pace and do just 8 things, where accumulation, racket, complexity, and tight schedules are all the rage, simplicity seems risky, downright perilous. What if we simplified? What if we "downsized" our calendar, our possessions, our commitments? Have we fallen for the lie that to be simple is to miss out?

To be simple: 'tis a gift. To shed the frantic busy-ness, to stop shoveling coal into the runaway train engine, to focus peacefully on a few things and believe life will be sufficient, that the simple life is good enough, requires faith in God, a trust that it's not all up to me. God has the world and our lives well in hand, so we can embrace simplicity.

In a lifetime we make countless small decisions. In most of them, one option is simple, the other more complicated. If, over and over, we choose the simpler route, we make our lives simpler, calmer, more focused, less harried.

Jesus came to dinner at the home of Mary and Martha – who surprisingly was scolded by Jesus for being "anxious about many things." Jesus invited her to a simpler, truer existence: "One thing is needful" (Luke 10:40).

Henri Nouwen was a world-famous theologian on the faculty of Harvard; but he felt God calling him to leave that

jetset life and live as a priest at [L'Arche](#), where his responsibility was to care for one – just one – severely handicapped adult. Is God's will always something bigger, grander? [Nouwen wrote](#) that "at L'Arche I experienced a sense of home I had not experienced at Harvard. The noncompetitive life with mentally handicapped people, their gifts of welcoming me regardless of prestige opened in me a place I had not known. The handicapped see through our façades, unmasking our impatience, irritation, jealousy... For them what counts is a real friendship." Might God's will be less, and truer?

Simplicity saves you a few trips to the mall. To live simply, we forego a purchase, not because we can't afford it, but on the principle that less might just be more, that being not so loaded down we might travel more lightly, and perhaps even to wean ourselves from the addiction to things and consuming. As Jesus said, "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15)...

... and having less clutter might clear the air for our relationship with God to be able to breathe. 'Tis the gift of where we ought to be.

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## **eThingsChristiansDo - stand**

After we kneel, we stand up. In ancient times, people prayed standing, hands lifted up. and the question we might ask if we have knelt and prayed is: How can I make what I do next prayerful? From prayer I turn to go, but must the prayer end? When I stand, can I let the intimacy with God linger? Can I tie threads between my pleas and gratitude to God, and what I do through the balance of the day?

Scientists speak of our distant ancestors as homo erectus. With a larger brain, homo erectus figured out how to hunt, use more sophisticated tools, migrate, and to stand erect. Every time we stand, we reenact the nobility of humanity: we are people who stand, who are made in God's image, with mental capacities to work, to move around, to make the most of the gifts God has strewn around the world. We can get a better look at things, including God. We inventory our abilities, human ingenuity, creativity - and when we stand up, we give glory to God.

Before legislation and changed hearts brought integration to Charlotte, [Harry Golden](#) (one of our city's most fascinating citizens) advocated "vertical integration." Blacks and whites could not sit down in restaurants, but they could stand at sandwich counters - so he suggested we remove chairs from buildings if we can stand up together but not sit. With whom do we stand? Do we stand up with (or for) the voiceless, the people with no connections, the poor, the lonely?

One of our best phrases, I think, is "Take a stand." If I fix my position on a moral issue, I "take a stand." I stand up to be counted, I care enough to be visible, out there, maybe with others but maybe just by myself. But I care enough to believe, to declare myself. The wishy-washy never take a stand, and the smug take only private stands, known only in the hushed corridors of their inward ruminations. The people God made to stand erect, to mirror the glory of God, take stands.

[Martin Niemöller](#) (the German pastor who didn't flinch when Hitler sent the Gestapo to monitor his sermon entitled "Christ is my Führer!" and wound up in a concentration camp) pointed out how many Germans let World War II and the Holocaust happen by their simple passivity: "When they came for the gypsies, I was not a gypsy, so I said nothing; when they came for the catholics, I was protestant, so I said nothing; when they came for the Jews, I was not a Jew, so I said nothing; finally they came for me, but by that time there was no one left to stand up. We kept accommodating what was going on, because if it wasn't happening to me it couldn't be that bad. If I could turn back the clock to 1933, I would have sounded the alarm, I would have stood up."

The things Christians do: we kneel and pray, we see what God sees, and then we stand up.

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## **eThingsChristiansDo – sleep**

Christians sleep. Of course, everybody sleeps. But is there a wrinkle to the way we pull up the covers at night?

We might envy Franklin Delano Roosevelt: boldly leading his country through the Great Depression and World War II, he told a friend "At night when I lay my head on my pillow, I think of the decisions I have made, and I say to myself – well, I have done the best I could – and then I turn over and go to sleep." Perhaps faith in God, a calm trust in the goodness of God, a sense of forgiveness and hope, might help us sleep better.

One of God's loveliest gifts is rest. And how humbling: God wired us in a way that we are simply unable to work 24 hours a day. Calculate the percentage of your life you do nothing but lie around in bed; the world keeps moving at a brisk pace, but you are totally unaware. You even snore, or drool, your hair is a mess – but God has the world well in hand. Every day God grants us a restful reminder of our limitations, and whether we acknowledge it or not we embody faith by letting go of our doing and trust God that all will be well.

"To sleep, perchance to dream..." How intriguing that little movies play in our heads when we think the brain has shut down! In the Bible, God uses dreams to divulge what God is about to do; in our lives, we might pay attention to our dreams, as they can supply evidence of anxiety and unresolved issues we might bring before God.

No matter how stalwart our faith, there are many nights we are awakened; the concerns of the day invade, and they seem darker, more fearful, and we shiver, gasping helplessly with no one to talk to, no office is open we can call... When sleep is impossible, we can imagine God's arms as our bedding, God's heart as our pillow; "even the darkness is not dark" to God (Psalm 139:12).

Mother Teresa said, "At the end of the day, look at your hands, and ask them, 'Where have you been today? and what have you done?'" We celebrate the good, and own the fact we have waved God off quite a few times. Confession is the opposite of negative thinking. My passion is to love God with every fiber of my being, and so to ask, not How do I feel about my day? ... but God, What is your read on my day? is healthy, hopeful, progressive. You can drift off to sleep as a forgiven person.

And as a grateful person. No matter how exhausted you think you are, devote a few minutes to a highlight reel of the blessings of the day, and the fog of weariness lifts. You breathed, you ate, the dog curled up at your ankle, the tree swayed in the breeze, the Church is still standing. Look at your hands, fold them, and be thankful. You can rest now, in the comfort that God is good, and it's not all up to you.

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## **eThingsChristiansDo - kneel**

As someone with bad knees since high school football days, I do not find kneeling to be a pleasurable experience. But think about the posture of prayer, the significance of being on your knees. Of course, kneeling is a gesture of humility: in traditional cultures, you bow to be vertically and symbolically lower than a superior.

But if you kneel, you cannot run away very quickly, or smoothly; you have to stay, you commit to whatever transpires while you are down there, you will not flee the presence of God. Your hands are folded as well, making it hard to hit anybody, or grab anything; if you kneel your hands are comfortably in front of you, in a receptive position. When you kneel, your head almost instinctively drops toward the ground as well; humbly you can pray, "O Lord, my eyes are not raised to high; I do not occupy myself with things to great for me, but I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child nursed by its mother" (Psalm 131).

Some might say that kneeling may be nothing more than a hollow charade, a mere going through the motions. True: what matters is the humility, the constancy, the openness of the heart. In the [Apocrypha](#), those books accepted by Roman Catholics but excluded for sacred use by Protestants, we find the eloquent "[Prayer of Manasseh](#)," the climax of which is: "And now I bend the knee of my heart, beseeching thee for thy kindness."

But perhaps our hearts remain hard and unconverted because we are tense bodily, or we never lower ourselves to engage in something physical - however uncomfortable - for God. Could it be easier to act your way into feeling something than to feel your way into acting? By moving my body into a prayerful posture, I declare myself, and wait for the gift of humble communion with God. In the Armenian liturgy, the priest offers this plea to God for the people in worship: "Have mercy on this people bowed down; stamp upon their hearts the posture of their bodies, for the inheritance of good things to come."

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## **eThingsChristiansDo - pray**

Christians pray. Of course, non-Christians pray too. What is prayer? and is there anything peculiar about the habit of prayer for Christians?

Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, [wrote](#) that prayer "isn't getting ourselves where we can see God so much as getting ourselves where God can see us - getting ourselves into the light of his presence, putting aside our defences and disguises, coming into silence and stillness so that what stands before God is not the performer, not the mask, the habits of self-promotion and self-protection" - but the transparent, simple me.

Prayer is a conversation, not a mechanism to get stuff we want done. Prayer is two-way love, not a quickie chore. Prayer takes time, some concentration, a bit of imagination, and a quiet place and committed time. You commit to pray whether you feel like praying or not. [Paul Waitman Hoon](#) suggested that people "are more likely to be devout because they are made to pray, than to pray because they feel devout."

Prayer is about God before it's about me. Prayer is awe, wonder, letting ourselves be dazzled by the beauty of the world and the power of God who looms over the galaxies and between all the subatomic particles too. Prayer is regret - but with a purpose: prayer admits we have been lackluster in the things of God, and just plain ugly to each other and ourselves, but prayer is never complacent, plying God for medicine to heal and a renewed spirit. Prayer is gratitude, laughing at the ridiculous notion that I "deserve" what I have, seeing even the simplest item or moment as a spectacular gift of God.

Christians pray "in Jesus' name." This is not a magical incantation that, if uttered properly, causes the prayer to take effect. Jesus' name means "Lord, help!" or "Lord, save us!" We pray as a cry for aid, a craving to be loved. When we pray, we let the life, words, death and resurrection of Jesus play as the background music, setting the tone for our conversation with God. We remember his holiness, his compassion for all people, his resistance to the devil, his humility, courage and total availability to God, his suffering - "What wondrous love is this?" - and his triumph over the grave, after which he pushed his friends out into the world to continue being Jesus, the living Body of Christ, in the world. To think on these things in the presence of God is the noblest possible prayer.

Does prayer work? Hardly the right question! [Sam Wells](#), dean of Duke Chapel, is right in saying prayer is not a means to anything else: "Prayer is an end in itself, it is an experience of God's ultimate purpose that his people should worship him and be his friends."

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## **eThingsChristiansDo - wait**

Americans loathe waiting. To be stuck in traffic, or a long grocery line, checking the time for an appointment that hasn't shown up, sitting in the doctor's waiting room, or hanging on through the long weekend wondering if it's malignant or benign: we cannot stand to wait, we want to keep moving, to get on with things, not to squander minutes needlessly.

How intriguing then is it that the Bible values waiting so highly, almost as if faith is a matter of waiting. "For God alone my soul waits" (Psalm 62:5). "Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:31). "I wait for the

Lord; in his word I hope" (Psalm 130:5).

If we loathe waiting, if emotions stir, if rage creeps over us, perhaps this is a signal of an underdeveloped, malnourished soul. Our frazzled inability to wait may keep God at arms' distance, if faith is a kind of waiting.

Christians are the people who can wait. We have all the time in the world - in fact, all the time in eternity. A wait is an opportunity: instead of slamming your fists on the steering wheel, you fold those same hands and pray - which you probably think you don't have enough time for in the first place, rushing around like you do. You wind up in a waiting room for longer than suits you: take a book, download the Bible and read or listen, or simply do some thinking about your life, reflecting upon God - the meditation we mentioned last week. Someone's tardiness, a traffic snarl, or the other guy's incompetence forcing you to be still can be transformed into a surprisingly lovely gift of a deeper awareness of God - who waits patiently on us.

Faith is waiting - in two senses. First, there is a time element. We do not fully seize God or the satisfactions of the Spirit now. We long for God, we yearn for what God will give, and in the meantime we wait, and the waiting becomes joyful expectation. We do not demand God act now or never; we refuse to grow frustrated if there appears to be a delay.

Faith is also waiting in the sense of serving. The waiter exists to serve others. His desires, her preferences, are beside the point. The waiter wants only to please the one dining, the customers - and faith is that same kind of service to God, and to the people of God, in humility asking "What can I get for you? How can I make your day better? No request is too grand." We place ourselves at God's disposal; we wait so we can wait. "They also serve who only stand and wait" ([John Milton](#)).

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## **eThingsChristiansDo - study**

For many of us, the mere mention of the word "study" might raise the blood pressure a few points. We recall tense moments when we were compelled to study some thick textbook on some daunting subject, the anxiety of a test looming, the deadline of a term paper closing in. Studying is something we figure we retired from years ago, or we look around the Church and think there are some types of people who sign up for "studies". but me?

An essential element of the Christian life is study. Jesus' followers were called "disciples" (a word that means "students"). There is a curriculum, you learn some basics, you develop new mental skills, the knowledge is steeped and acquires a depth. A three year old glues cotton on construction paper and it's Jesus the good shepherd. But if a 43 year old hasn't advanced much further intellectually in the faith, we have a problem.

The spiritual premise of study is this: I don't know all I need to know. People who are cocky, who think they have all the answers and have life all figured out struggle at a self-imposed distance from God. The subject of our study is God: of course we have grasped only a small fraction of the immense wonder of the Almighty. Even when the subject is me and my life: I look into my soul and find a veneer that needs to be peeled back, and I learn more about myself as I learn more about God. With others it's the same: my spouse, my friends, people out in the world all elude me, but I relentlessly try to learn more, understand more, listen better, and thus love more deeply.

The Christian's most treasured asset is an inquiring mind. Curiosity is a spiritual gift. John Calvin spoke of the necessity of a "teachable spirit": am I humble enough, open enough, to learn?

We study together in groups, or alone. We rely on superb books, and there are many. I often say there are two and only two kinds of religious books: some are well-marketed and have a plot that says "God exists to serve you"; others don't seem to sell as well, and their plot is "You exist to serve God." Beware the first, embrace the second type of book.

The baseline of our curriculum is the Bible. It doesn't read like a page-turner. Someone asked me recently if I ever took speed-reading. I did, but I never speed read now. Anything worth reading is worth reading slowly, savoring the words, reading between the lines, reflecting on the heart, the hidden implications. We "study" the Bible, honing our

skill, cultivating a mind that increasingly approximates the mind of Christ, growing a heart that becomes one with the heart of God.

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### **eThingsChristiansDo - meditation**

When I had been a pastor for only a few months, I listened as a very wise, salt-of-the-earth brick mason told me the secret to his life I had grown to admire: "Every evening, after we've had dinner and my wife and I talk a while, I go down into the basement, and sit on a peach barrel in front of my wood stove, and I just think for a while."

St. Francis of Assisi claimed he would have been totally lost were it not for his habit of lying down on the ground, looking up at the clouds or stars, and just reflecting for an hour or so every day.

Meditation: over the centuries, Christians have understood the value of simply being still, and quiet, thinking about life, and people, what has transpired, listening, resting. We are a superficial people, driven, fearful, easily thrown off balance, largely because we never meditate, we are always rushing to - well, to what? Didn't you nod years ago when your schoolteacher told you what Socrates said at his trial? "The unexamined life is not worth living" - or what Thoreau wrote about moving to Walden? "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front the essential facts of life and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not when I come to die discover that I had not lived."

We take time to be still, to say "Not everything depends on me and my feverish activity," to say "I am not fearful of what I will find in my soul," and "I dare not plunge through the next decade from one urgent calendar item to the next without regularly taking time for the dust to settle, to peel away the layers of my existence." Meditation is partly recollection: I remember the day I just experienced, I remember my childhood, I remember people to whom I am indebted, I remember what God has done in my life.

Perhaps your brain is like mine, and it's hard to meditate: considerable effort is required to sit still, and my mind ricochets from one concern to another. I get distracted. But instead of beating myself up because my mind drifts to something that presses on me, I can thank God, and use the time to reflect on that something, to offer it up to God, and often what seemed so pressing ten minutes ago isn't such a problem after all.

Music can help us focus, or we may find it useful to focus on some object (like a cross, or an image of St. Francis); maybe we write out a Bible verse and read it over and over, or we hold our palms open in a gesture symbolic of our receptiveness to God. Whatever it takes, we demarcate a place and time, we just sit, quietly, and construct an empty space where we might notice the beauty of our lives, or hear the voice of God, or daydream.

Sound intimidating? Or like something you don't have the skill to do? Relax: meditation is not a spiritual achievement, but a gift of God. It is "the work of the Holy Spirit acting on our souls through gifts of wisdom and understanding" ([Thomas Merton](#)). Our part is just to sit, do nothing, and wait.

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### **eThingsChristiansDo - wash**

Think how many times during each day you find yourself doing something you could call "washing." You shower, wash your hands, rinse out a glass, stash clothes in the washing machine, mop, brush your teeth. A mindless chore, too obvious to put on the checklist, you just do it. But could the simple act of applying water to clean something (or yourself) become a simple act of faith?

Martin Luther urged all Christians to "Remember your Baptism, and be thankful." What if, every time you wash, or you feel the water, or maybe you even just get wet, caught in the rain maybe, you "remember your Baptism, and be thankful."

From the beginning, Christians very wisely chose the simplest element, water, as the one they would use to symbolize God's gift of life, the cleansing power of God's grace, the unearnable forgiveness God offers, the magnificent power of the Spirit. They could have chosen something exotic or hard to find: gold, or an emerald, or some exotic ointment, or a peacock's feather. But water was best. It's familiar, accessible, and even a child knows what water is for.

Baptism isn't like launching a ship with a champagne bottle; it is God miraculously washing God's children, slaking their thirst, transmitting divine power into them.

In the basilica at Belmont Abbey, there is a striking baptismal font - a large, unhewn, rough stone. Its plaque tells a mind-boggling story, and the truth about the power of God: "Upon this rock men once were sold into slavery. Now upon this rock, through the water of Baptism, Men become free children of God." The old slave auction block transformed into an instrument of the grace of God: water changes things, water gives life, water - even the slightest dripping of water, over time - can even reshape something as hard as a rock.

The possibility of being washed: when Jesus washed the disciples' feet, Peter said "Wash all of me!" And the hope hidden in water calls to mind the opening and dominant theme of *The Kite Runner*: "There is a way to be good again."

Christians wash. So does everyone else - but we can make the morning shower, turning on the faucet, splashing our face, and even doing the laundry into a reminder, a brief recalling of the goodness of God, the fact of our forgiveness, the cleansing mercy of God, and our place in God's Church, the great company of those no longer enslaved to the world, but the free children of God.

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## **eThingsChristiansDo - fasting**

Historically, Christians "fast" during the season of Lent: you don't eat on Friday, or at least you don't eat meat on Friday. You "give up" chocolate or fries or wine. Given the wonder of eating and its inherent goodness, the fast sharpens our appetite and appreciation for the gifts we might otherwise take for granted.

Nothing is more alien to our culture than fasting, since we are addicted to the satisfaction of desire. But consider Moses, Elijah, David, Paul, Jesus himself, St. Francis: all knew that renunciation is the only route to fulfillment. Fasting is not giving up something harmful, like smoking or double martinis. Fasting is giving up something good in itself, something I have and love, but which I do without for a time for the sake of God.

When we feed every whim, and never let ourselves struggle with hunger for food or other things, then our deeper desire for God comes to be masked over, desensitized. I need to fast to remind myself that my deep quest is not for mere food or items in the mall. I blunt those desires to whet my appetite for God. When hunger gnaws, I discover how hollow I am inside, how superficial I can be. In Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster says, "Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels."

We also learn a solidarity with the needy, who by no choice of their own are denied simple pleasures and satisfactions. I am anxious because I am missing lunch, or chocolate? What about those who won't have lunch or dinner today, or tomorrow?

Fasting need not be merely about food. We can fast from words: a time or season of silence cultivates good in the soul. We can fast from the media: missing a few TV shows or internet sites won't harm your spirit. We can fast from blithely tolerating the nonsense in our world: "Is not this the fast I choose - to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to share bread with the hungry, to house the homeless, and not to hide yourself?" (Isaiah 58:6).

We can fast from alcohol: see if you are more dependent than you thought you were. We can fast from criticism: try not saying anything negative for a day, or a week. Robert E. Lee might have been right: "Renunciation is the most beautiful word in the English language."

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## **eThingsChristiansDo - eat**

During Lent we speak of "fasting." To make sense of the fast, we might think about what it means to eat. Instinctively an infant consumes, and for all of life we repetitively, forever find ourselves to be hungry, partly to survive, but there is the dimension of pleasure, and even the good company of others.

Before we eat we say the "blessing." Of course, it is God who has done the blessing of us through the gift of food. "God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food." God is great, but God doesn't cook it for us in heaven and then parachute the plate onto the table. God made the world with ground and creatures that are fruitful, edible, potable, a wonder that would be pointless were it not for God's gift of human ingenuity to plant, gather, store, and prepare the food. When you sit at any meal, you can have your mind blown (and simultaneously be filled not just with food but with the wonder of God and humble gratitude) as you think of how many people played some part in the meal. Maybe you say thanks to as many of them as possible - whoever cooked, the grocer, a farmer you might meet, and certainly to God.

The gift of ingenuity is a mandate too, isn't it? God has provided enough food, a sufficiently productive earth, for everybody to have enough. People are hungry, children starve, but we are smart enough to feed everybody if we want to - and we can be sure God wants us to. When we eat, we remember those who cannot eat, and we don't merely sigh or mutter a prayer for them. We do something to be in some small measure the answer to the prayer of the hungry.

Many of Jesus' most memorable moments came during meals. He was mocked for eating with sinners (Luke 15:2), and with a marked lack of manners debunked social customs about who's invited and who isn't. The Christian who eats never quite forgets about Jesus' stunning words in Luke 14:7-14 suggesting we invite those who cannot invite us back. Whom do you eat with? Do you ever cross social boundaries? Whether we like it or not, Jesus seems to prefer we do so - not to make life hard, but so we might grow and be more like Christ himself.

Every time we eat, we might make a quick mental notice that Jesus was at the dinner table with his friends when he solemnly, but with shimmering hope, gave them food and wine and said "Do this in remembrance of me." Every meal can be a time to remember Jesus, which can stir in us gratitude, joy, a determination to make a difference, and even laughter and love. And, as we will see tomorrow, fasting takes on richer meaning once we grasp the profound nature of eating.

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## **eThingsChristiansDo - breathe**

What do Christians do? Lots of things. But it's intriguing, lovely, humbling to recognize that the first thing we do is involuntary. You just breathed, and you're about to do it again. But you didn't decide to breathe; you didn't flex your lungs, and you can't congratulate yourself for the achievement of another breath.

The most important thing you'll do today, or any day, is involuntary - and this must be God's wry cleverness. My life is not my own, I am dependent upon God. Through a marvelous action I do not even choose I find myself alive, able to think about God, to live for God.

In the Bible, the air belongs to God. It is God who moves the air around, stirring the breeze, providing loft for birds, moving unnoticed in and out of you. The gift of life: all we can do in the face of this graciously moving air we cannot see is to give thanks. Involuntarily I draw another breath, and I am filled with the grace of God; involuntarily I let it back out, and I exult in gratitude.

Christians breathe - and so does everyone else. We find a superb rationale to be attentive to people who are

different, to respect and love others: all people, quite involuntarily, "do" the breathing thing; all are recipients of this most basic gift of God, no matter what they believe, and even if they disbelieve or even hate God.

Many spiritual giants have spoken of "breath prayer." During the day, as you breathe, you form some simple word you might even whisper. You need not stop what you are doing or close your eyes. How else would you "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17)? As you breathe, let the air form a brief utterance toward God, perhaps even a simple word like "Jesus." Robert Dodd wrote that "the key to effectiveness in prayer lies in praying the name of Jesus repeatedly, continually, and authoritatively. To have his name in our thoughts and prayers is to experience his strength and influence at work in our lives."

There is another type of breath: the sigh. What is a sigh? Just air rushing out of you, but with the nuance of resignation, or relief. We sigh. We give up thinking we can manage our world and manipulate everything, and we can imagine this exhaling as a release of the pressure, giving things back to God.

A sigh is also a yearning. Young lovers sigh for each other; our breath can be our desire for God, our stretching out toward the elusive presence of God. When we breathe, can we sense God in the sigh? "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). Breathe! It's involuntary. It's the gift of God.

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## **eThingsChristiansDo - good questions**

We've entertained intriguing questions over the past six weeks, and have explored mysteries of God's mind and our own thought. Now we shift into another zone - but it's not unrelated! The value of good thinking ought to be a good life; faith is tested and proven in the living of it, or not at all.

So between now and Easter we will be asking "What do Christians do?" Some of us were reared on the unsatisfying notion that Christians are people who "don't," that we are defined by what we avoid. We do avoid many things, and at times we turn and sprint away from much of what the world fawns over.

But the lifestyle of faith is positive, not a boring isolation from what's fun or interesting. We do, we engage, and it's an adventure, meaningful, even joyful. Yes, we know we are not saved by our doing. No mountains of good deeds earns us a place in God's inner circle. But people who are saved, who are grasped by the unearnable grace of God: how do they live?

And it's not about doing good deeds. Rather, we are thinking about habits, routines, disciplines, regular activities. If you are seeking God, if you are receptive to the grace of God, there are some things you do to deepen that. And there are other things you can do that will inhibit, poison, and confuse your relationship with God.

Things Christians do: many are things everybody does, but we think about them differently, we discover a rich nuance that transforms something as simple as breathing, eating or getting dressed into an opportunity to grow in faith, and to connect with God.

And we have our downright peculiar activities as well! Join me during this Lenten season as we reflect together about the things we do, why we do them, how we do them, and the people we are either unwittingly or intentionally becoming. As always, click "reply" to ask questions or converse with me, and click "forward" to share with others.

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