

VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Reading
with
Leader's
Guide

“We live our lives in search. We search for a self to be, for other selves to love, and for work to do.” {Frederick Buechner}

These are not new things that we moderns are searching for; they are as old as the hills. **The struggle to find others** with whom we can share our lives, others who give our lives texture and color and meaning, has been going on forever. **The task of finding work** to do that is fulfilling and productive and sufficient for our needs has been constant. **The need for rest and sustenance** and time apart has been never-ending. **Our hope and our yearning and our desire for God**, and life lived with God, have been everlasting, from age to age.

The world is not a simple place. It never really was. But it is clear that with the noise and the pace and the demands of life in the information age--if that is still the name for the age in which we are living--the struggle to balance all of those things becomes more and more difficult, and more and more necessary...

How then to wrestle our way into a life of good days that will yield up some sense of the life for which we yearn? How then to balance all of these competing voices and demands and tensions--some of them good, some of them not so good, and some of them simply omnipresent--with our longing to be with God? In a world that keeps asking us to go higher and faster, how do we begin to go deeper, into the place where God lives and moves and has His being with us?

{Robert Benson, *A Good Life: Benedict's Guide to Everyday Joy*}

Think about that opening line: “We live our lives in search.” Does your own life feel like a search?

Both Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner and spiritual writer Robert Benson identify the central longings of our hearts. Do you agree with this list? Are they missing anything that you'd put on your own personal list.

Looking back on your experience so far, what would you say that you have “found”? What are you still searching for?

Of the searches they identify, which longing is most powerful or poignant for you right now?

How do you balance the competing voices, demands and tension in your own life? How do you go deeper--when the world is asking you to go higher and faster?

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time. A schedule is a mock-up of reason and order--willed, faked, and so brought into being; it is a peace and a haven set into the wreck of time; it is a lifeboat on which you find yourself, decades later, still living. Each day is the same, so you remember the series afterward as a blurred and powerful pattern. {Annie Dillard}

What is the key insight in these words from the America writer Annie Dillard?

How does schedule function in your life?

Benedict (480-547) & Scholastica (480-543)

The ‘little rule for beginners’ is Benedict’s call to his monks to live out the Gospel in everything that they do...Even though I am not called to live the life of a monk, I am called to live a life that becomes the Gospel. I too am called to pray without ceasing. I too long to be the sort of person who brings honor and glory to the Kingdom by the way that I live my life.

{Robert Benson}

In what ways could your life be similar to the life of a monk's? (this may take some imagination!)

This “life that becomes the Gospel”...what might that look like?

The Rule of Saint Benedict was originally written to serve a few communities in 6th century Italy. Benedict wrote this “rule of life”, a sort of guidebook or manual, for the small groups of people who agreed to live together, committed to the goal of living so that every effort moved them closer to God and to one another. The 73 short chapters cover many topics, from the particulars of prayer and worship to rules on the daily schedules of work and rest, as well as guidance on discipline, disagreement and leadership.

1. From the Prologue to the Rule of St. Benedict

Seeking his workers in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out and lifts us his voice again: Is there anyone here who yearns for life and who desires to see good days? Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out this charge: If you hear God’s voice today, do not harden your hearts. We must, then, prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to God’s instructions. What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace.

We intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love.

Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.

Listen carefully to these instructions and attend to them with the ear of your heart. It is advice from one who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice.

Imagine you are listening to these words from Benedict for the first time; perhaps you’re thinking about joining the community. What words, phrases or ideas stand out to you?

Benedict speaks of establishing a school for God’s service. If you were writing the school’s curriculum, what would you include?

What is Benedict’s view on rules and strictness?

What promises does Benedict make in this passage?

Think about your own life. What truths have you heard with the “ear of your heart”?

The following passages are examples from Benedict’s Rule. Let’s notice how he speaks of everyday, mundane matters; how might the particular rules help community members “become the Gospel”?

2. Every community needs a business manager. Someone chosen from the ranks who is wise, mature, and careful, not gluttonous, proud, excitable or wasteful....She will take care of everything, but will not run things her own way—she’ll listen closely to the community’s leadership....She must take care of the sick members, children, guests, and the poor, knowing for sure that she’ll answer at the final reckoning for how she treated them. She will handle the community’s pots and pans, furniture and supplies, like a priest handles the sacred vessels at the altar, careful not to neglect anything....More than anything else, let her be humble. She will provide community members with the food that is allotted to each of them without any pride or delay, so as not to distract anyone from their task....If the community is large, she should be given helpers so she can calmly carry out the duties assigned to her. Whatever is necessary should be requested and provided at the proper time so that one is agitated or distressed in the house of God. (31)

What do you notice about Benedict’s requirements for the business manager? How does this person strengthen the community?

Can you name anyone who would be fit for this role? In what ways are you a business manager in your own circle?

Where is the line between the secular and the spiritual in Benedict’s writing here?

Benedict speaks of pots, pans, furniture and supplies as being like sacred vessels. What are the tools or equipment that you use each day? How could they serve as sacred vessels for your own community (and who are the members of your community?)

3. Sisters and brothers should serve one another. This is why there's no excused absence from kitchen duty unless someone is sick or busy serving the community in another capacity, for service that grows our love for one another is the goal. Anyone who needs help should have it so they can serve without frustration. As a matter of fact, everyone should have some help; it is better to work better together than alone... Let everyone serve one another in love.

On Saturday the member who is completing her rotation will do the kitchen laundry. She should wash the hand towels that hang by the sink where the members wash their hands... All the pots and pans and dishes should be washed and returned in good order to the business manager, who will re-issue them to the member starting her kitchen duty... The server who is completing her week should say: *Blessed are you, Lord God, who have helped me and comforted me* (Psalm 86:17b). After she says this three times, she receives a blessing. Then the one who is beginning her service says: *God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me.* (Psalm 70:1). And everyone repeats this verse together three times. When she has received a blessing, her kitchen duty begins. (35)

Why do you think Benedict requires everyone in the community to do kitchen duty?

What is the goal of service, as Benedict sees it?

Why do you think he puts such specific rituals into place—the repeated verses, the blessing?

Do you have any specific household or family rituals, duties, expectations, chores? How do those function?

4. The first step of humility is to listen without delay. When we love Christ more than anything else, this becomes our natural reflex... The Lord is talking about this kind of good listener when he says: *As soon as they heard me they listened and did what I asked* (Psalm 18:44) and again, the Lord says to teachers: *Whoever listens to you, listens to me* (Luke 10:16). Good listeners quickly put aside their own concerns. They're not obsessed with what they want but will lay down their own projects, leaving them unfinished. Because they're always ready to listen, their actions are determined by an authority other than themselves. As soon as the community has a need, they are ready to meet it in humble submission to God. In this way, the sharing of the need by one member and the meeting of it by another happen as if they were a single act. (5)

Can you think of anyone you know who is a very good listener? Talk about your interactions with that person.

How is "listening without delay" the first step of humility? Why is humility linked to listening?

What keeps you from listening in this way?

What would have to change to shape you into a better listener?

5. We should be willing to listen to everyone—not just those in leadership but every member—for we know that we go to God by the way of obedience... Anyone who objects to this should be corrected. If anyone in the community is corrected—or if someone even gets the feeling that someone else is angry with him—he should bow down before the person right then and there and ask forgiveness. He ought not to get up off the ground until his fellow community member has blessed him. This is how unity is maintained—through mutual submission to one another out of reverence for Christ. Anyone who will not learn and follow this way cannot remain as part of the community. (71)

If someone asked you, "What is the secret to unity within a family?" how would you begin to answer?

How might Benedict answer?

Benedict says that anyone who cannot follow the practices around asking and giving forgiveness cannot remain in the community. This seems really harsh? Why do you think it's so important to Benedict?

6. Always try to find space for silence, but especially at night. This should be written into the schedule: when there are two meals, everyone will sit together after supper and listen to a spiritual classic like Cassian's Conferences or a saint's biography—something that will benefit everyone, though it shouldn't be too hard to complicated, since it's easy for some monastics to get confused at the end of the day. Save the hard reading for another time. ...Once everyone is together, they should pray the Compline; and when they are finished, they should depart in silence. If anyone breaks this rule of silence, it should be taken very seriously (unless guests require attention or leadership needs to give special instruction; but even necessary conversation should be kept to an absolute minimum). (42)

What are your evening and nighttime routines—as a family or as an individual?

Why do you think Benedict suggest this reading aloud to the community?

Why is silence important? Where do you find silence in the course of 24 hours? What would happen if you decided to schedule silence? Where would you put it?

Is the practice of keeping silence something you'd like to adopt? What would need to change for you to do that?

What other routines do you find life-giving?

What routines are you in—even if you haven't consciously chosen them—that are harmful or unproductive?

If someone watched your life 24/7 for a week and then described the Rule of Life that you follow, what might they say?

Again: how do routines, schedules, rules and practices shape your life over time?

What can you learn from Benedict and Scholastica?