



211: The Daily Examen

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 211. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Listen in.

What is the daily examen? How does it work? What is the purpose? And what does it have to do with discerning my next right thing? Every now and then I like to host an episode introducing a spiritual practice that I've found to be personally transformative. Now I haven't necessarily scheduled these episodes in any formal way, although maybe I will moving forward into the future, but I will say I have done this in the past periodically, for example, I've shared about the ancient practice of borrowing prayers in episode 93. And then we've prayed some of those prayers together here, like in episode 160, the welcoming prayer, and the prayer of St. Francis to begin the new year, that was episode 207. I've also shared a few episodes about the practice of spiritual direction. What it is, how to find a spiritual director and how it's different from counseling, discipleship or coaching.

You can learn more about spiritual direction in episodes 167 and 178. All of these practices play a part in our spiritual formation. Dallas Willard said everybody gets a spiritual formation, just like everyone gets an education. But the question is, what kind? One simple definition of spiritual formation that I like comes from Michael J. Cusick, who says the work of spiritual formation is to tend to the gap between what we believe and what we experience. I have my master's degree in spiritual formation and leadership and I teach a few times a year in a master's program of spiritual formation. And I'm also a lifelong observer and student of people. But mostly I'm fascinated by what compels us to change. This isn't a clinical fascination. It's more of a human one. I'm not a practitioner. I'm not a theologian. I'm not a historian. I have the heart of an artist.

I have the skill of a writer in the mind of a teacher. But the way I process information, it's not primarily through a cognitive understanding first, but through an experience, an imagery that may eventually turn to cognitive understanding, or sometimes it doesn't. Frederick Buechner in his book, *Whistling in the Dark* writes that an artist is one who puts a frame around the moment, enabling us to see not just something about the moment, but the moment itself in all its ineffable ordinariness and particularity. The frame does not change the moment, but changes our way of perceiving the moment. Maybe that's kind of what I do here. I work to put a frame around the moments of our lives and that frame doesn't change the moments

themselves, but perhaps it shifts our way of perceiving the moments that we're living. For me, that's been a transformational practice, but all spiritual practices are simply pathways to experiencing the enlivening presence of the spirit of God.

That is the point after all. It isn't about what we do or do not do, about what practices our tradition upholds as ones we're to engage in or not to engage. It's not about what items on a spiritual checklist that we need to check off. In fact, if a spiritual practice is causing you to experience shame, anxiety, tension, or overwhelm, I'd say that's a practice you don't need to be doing right now. It doesn't mean the practice itself is bad or that you'll never engage with it again, but anxiety in a practice is your body trying to tell you something. It could be an arrow to a wound. It may also be, and often is evidence of a season of growth or change, even though it probably doesn't feel that way, but that could be what it is. It may also mean that somewhere along the way, your soul started to travel in a wilderness space.

Again, that's not an indication that something is wrong. That's an indication that something is living. There is a true narrative and that is the stunning and relentless love God has for you. If a practice runs counter to that narrative, take a pause, take a break, take a breath and find a practice that reminds you of the love of God instead. The daily examine is one of those practices for me. Now in the same way a spiritual practice may need to be set aside for a time if it's causing anxiety, you may also want to consider all the ways in which your ordinary life might be a spiritual practice all by itself. Brother Lawrence, who served as a cook in his monastery back in the 1600s, practiced God's presence in the ordinary business of life while washing the dishes. Author, Sarah Bessey says every rhythm of life is a path to prayer.

I've even submitted that wearing better fitting pants can be a spiritual practice as it's a way of honoring our image of God bearing identity and not forcing ourselves into shapes that we've outgrown. The practice isn't what makes something spiritual or not spiritual, it's the posture. Everything has spiritual potential if done in the presence of God. And so to talk about the daily examine is no more spiritual than to talk about making the bed. In fact, it could be less spiritual if we talk about the examine in a shaming or a judgemental way, there will be none of that here. So what is the daily examine? Well, I'm all about simple definitions here. Ignatian spirituality gives one, a very simple definition that the daily examine is a technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence and discern God's direction for us. It's an ancient practice of prayer passed down in the church that can help us see where God is working in our lives every day.

So how do you practice it? Well, one version is one that St. Ignatius practiced, which was a five step rhythm starting with simply becoming aware of God's presence at the end of the day, and then reflecting on the day with gratitude with Thanksgiving, and next paying attention to what emotions rise up. I love that in the five movements of the daily examine that emotions or what feelings that you experience throughout the day is the central part. It's something that we're to pay attention to, to notice and to name. And then four, choose one part of the day and pray from it. And finally, look toward tomorrow. You'll notice some elements of my own practice of reflecting on the week in our these are the days of lists where we list out what these days are made of. Looking back on the day is part of the examine for sure.

The difference for me is, well, there's a couple of things, with the reflection that I usually talk about here, I encourage a practice of writing things down. I repeat that a lot. I think it's really important that we write things down in reflection. Write down your these are the days of list so you can be aware of your actual life while you're living it. And look back later, write down what's life giving and what's life training so

you can pay attention to how you're made and what makes you to come a live. Write down what you're learning and what questions you're carrying so that you can discern your next right thing. But the daily exam is a different kind of practice and is helpful in a different kind of way. For one, as I have begun to start practicing the daily exam, I don't write anything down.

For two, it's not as much about paying attention to my life, although I do think that's deeply important and that is part of the examine. But beyond that, it's about following the light that's showing itself in my life. And for three, it's not a record of memory. It's a practice of release. Now, I shared those five movements of the daily examine, but here are some questions that are helpful for me to ask as the day ends that could be helpful for you as well as you enter into your own personal form of daily examine. First question, what am I still holding onto from today that can be let go to God? Did any light show up even if the whole day felt dark? Where did God give me life today?

When was a moment of gladness? Do I sense an arrow toward my next right thing? My spiritual director recently said to me, it's very important to release your day. We are not God, so we get to sleep. You don't need anything to practice the daily examine except for a desire to do so. There are no tools and there don't need to be any rules. You can do it anywhere in the sacred privacy of your own imagination.

It's just you being you in the presence of God. Looking back on the day with intention and understanding that our daily life is not separate from our spirituality. And so this practice of looking back to notice where the light showed up, of releasing concerns, embarrassments, frustrations, anxiety into God's care for the night and of praying our way to sleep might not be something that comes naturally, but perhaps you can tuck it away as a practice to engage when you feel scattered, tossed by the winds of life or disrupted in your routine. Perhaps this can be one way of praying that can remind you that you are loved and you are seen as you do your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 211 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of prayer can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me weekly on Instagram at [emilypfreeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman) or online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can find a transcript of this and every episode. On the last day of every month, I'll send out a letter and I always include three questions for reflection.

If you want to receive this letter, these reflection questions, as well as a list of books I'm reading, simply visit emilypfreeman.com/letter. In closing, I have a few words from Mike Cosper, who you may recognize from his work on *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. But before that podcast ever aired, Mike wrote a book called *Recapturing the Wonder* that I read and loved several years ago. And in that book, he said this, any approach to the Christian life that seeks self-improvement as the end goal will fail. A life of prayer, fasting and spiritual disciplines can easily be a life of empty religious effort if the goal isn't communion with God. We don't need self-improvement. We need to come home.

Thanks for listening. And I'll see you next time.