

FIRST THINGS



FIRST THINGS

FIRST THINGS FIRST.

A new year and a new decade. Maybe there's something about that newness that makes you want to make some changes. Maybe there's something overwhelming about it. Maybe it just seems like any other month of any other year.

Wherever you find yourself in this new year of a new decade, we, as a church family, want to make first things really come first. We want to build whatever comes next on a solid foundation that makes a difference for the future.

Together, we want to put Christ first. Kingdom first. Character first.

In our world, there are so many other things vying for our attention. Our schedules are crammed and our responsibilities endless. We understand these are things that won't come first by default. We won't just "happen" to make them first, especially in our crazy busy lives. It takes intentionality. It requires deliberately setting them in the first place. Over and over again.

We've created a simple tool based on simple practices that have been around a long time that will help us do just that--put first things first.

We hope you'll take some time together with your family, a trusted friend, or your life group to dig in and make this new year a little different. The kind of different that will last.

THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN: an introduction

With the beginning of a new year comes the end of another. Taking time to review where you've been the past twelve months is an important step before moving forward. Often we move so fast through life we don't even know where we've been or what God has really done.

We want to slow down a bit and take a longer look over the past year, inviting God to show us where we've been.

Developed 400 years ago, the Ignatian prayer of Examen is a simple prayer practice that allows us to look with God back over our last twenty-four hours. We slow down, spending a few moments asking God to speak about where we've been and how we've lived. Where have we seen God move? Did we love him well? Did we love others well? Did we move closer to God? Farther away?

In this version of the PRAYER OF EXAMEN, we'll look over the last year at four major categories: physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual health.

There may be other areas you'd like to consider, but begin with these four.

You can work through all four categories at once or break up the time over a few days. There isn't a right or wrong way to do it. The important thing is that you do it.

The other important thing is to remember as you look at your year that God loves you. There is nothing you've done or experienced that he's not aware of. He's been present for it all. Regardless of what your year held, he's still loving you and he's still with you.

Find a quiet place where you can sit with each category, working through the questions slowly. This is not an exercise where the "first response is the right response."

Slow is the key.

In fact, thinking deeply about each question, you will probably find a longer look and lingering reflection will allow issues and concerns to rise that a quick response will simply overlook. Take your time and allow God to speak. Let his grace surround you as you begin.

FIRST THINGS

THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN

SECTION 1: BE STILL & INVITE GOD TO HELP

Find a quiet place where you can be alone with God. Remove as many distractions as possible (i.e. silence or turn off your cell phone, turn down the noise, remove yourself from crowded spaces, etc.) Before you begin, take a few moments to BE STILL before God. Quiet your heart, mind, and body.

Read through Psalm 139 as you begin.

Say an honest prayer to God. What fears do you have? Tell him about them. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts as you reflect on your year. Invite God's love to lead you.

SECTION 2: GRATITUDE

Gratitude cultivates our hearts and minds, orienting them toward the good things of God. When we spend time saying, "thank you," it really does change us.

Take a moment to reflect on this past year, making a list of the things that stir gratitude toward God. Be specific. Write them down and thank him for the good things from your year.

GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES;
FOR THIS IS GOD'S WILL FOR YOU IN CHRIST JESUS.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:18

SECTION 3: GENERAL EXAMINATION OF MY LIFE

Take some time to answer the following questions about your year.

1. What were the most important events that happened in my life in the past year?
2. What were the greatest breakthroughs in my life? (Consider the following categories: physical, emotional, relational, vocational, spiritual, etc.)
3. What was the greatest struggle I faced?
4. What was the greatest and deepest loss I experienced?
5. What was the area that most consumed my thinking and attention?
6. Where did I feel most vulnerable?
7. Where and when did I experience the presence of God and why?
8. Where and when did I experience the greatest sense of "consolation" (feeling closeness to God)?
9. Where and when did I experience the greatest sense of "desolation" (feeling distance from God)?
10. What is ONE word that might sum up this past year?

SECTION 4: CATEGORIES OF MY LIFE

My Physical Health

List five words that describe my physical condition and well-being this past year.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

FIRST THINGS

How did I value rest? How did I sleep? Did I engage in restorative recreation or play? How did I practice Sabbath?

What health choices did I give attention to?

What specific changes do I desire to make during this year that will help me honor God in my body?

My Emotional Health

What are five FEELINGS (positive or negative) that dominated my life this past year?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

When was I the MOST JOYFUL this past year? What was I doing, who was I with, and where was I?

When was I the SADDEST this past year? What was I doing, who was I with, and where was I?

What area of my life gave me the greatest sense of internal stress?

What area of my life gave me the greatest sense of internal joy?

How do I feel about my emotional well-being this past year?

What specific changes do I desire to make during this year to honor God in my emotions?

FIRST THINGS

My Relational Health

List the people who have been life-giving to me this past year:

What letter grade do I give for my over-all sense of having community?

A-Excellent B-Very Good C-Average D-Really lacking friends

Is my lifestyle, work schedule, and present reality conducive to having the relationships I want and desire? If not, what needs to be different?

What specific changes do I desire to make during this year to honor God in my relationships?

My Spiritual Health

What five words describe my spiritual health over the past year?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

How has my relationship with God grown over the last year?

The three most important spiritual take-a-ways from this past year that I never want to forget are:

What was my deepest spiritual struggle--the place of wrestling with God or the place of my deepest lament?

What people do I feel the most spiritually connected to in my life?

FIRST THINGS

What Scriptures, prayers, sermons, or spiritual readings have played an important role in this past year? How have they shaped me?

What specific changes do I desire to make during this year to honor God with my spiritual health?

SECTION 5: CONFESSION & REPENTANCE

Scripture says all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's best for us (Rom. 3:23). Scripture also says that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and will forgive us (1 John 1:9).

Confession simply means that we would "agree with God." We agree that what we've chosen isn't in line with his best for us. Maybe you've struggled with pride or selfishness. Maybe you've struggled with a stronghold that you need God's help to break. Maybe you've just not made time for him the way you want. Whatever it is, take some time to tell God about it.

Pray, asking what repentance or "turning away from or changing your mind" looks like in the coming year. Step into God's forgiveness, receiving his grace, mercy, and love.

IF WE CONFESS OUR SINS, HE IS FAITHFUL AND JUST
AND WILL FORGIVE US OUR SINS
AND PURIFY US FROM ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS.

1 JOHN 1:9

FIRST THINGS

SECTION 6: LOOKING TOWARD TOMORROW

As you enter into the new year, spend a few moments asking for God's blessing on the next twelve months.

Read through the beautiful prayer of Thomas Merton below. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you.

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end,
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore, will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Take a moment to pray through your upcoming year. Where do you need God's loving presence? Where do you need him to carry you? Where do you want to see and hear him more? Where do you desire breakthrough and need him to do a miracle in your life?

Write your own prayer for the coming year.

RULE OF LIFE: an introduction

In the first section of this exercise, we took time to prayerfully look back at our past year. We took time to be still, to be thankful, and to assess where we were physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

These next several questions are here to help you form a general plan to answer the question, "OK, after ALL of that reflection I just did...what now?"

To help us answer that question, we are going to craft a "rule of life." A rule of life is like a spiritual budget for our lives. Just like we plan where our money goes in a budget, we want to design our lives around certain things that will help become more like Jesus in the midst of our crazy world.

A rule of life is a schedule and set of practices and relational rhythms that help us create space in our busy world so we can be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what he did.

The word "rule" has all kinds of weird connotations in our culture, but as one author writes, "The Latin word we translate 'rule' was originally the word for TRELLIS in a vineyard. In the same way a vine needs a trellis to lift it off the ground, so it can bear the maximum amount of fruit, and keep free of predators and diseases, we need a rule as a kind of support structure to organize our life around 'abiding in the vine' (John 15:1-8) as Jesus imagined."

We want to produce fruit, so crafting a "rule of life" will help us be intentional about putting Christ first, Kingdom first, and our development of character first.

RULE OF LIFE

There is no one "right" way to design a rule of life, but here are a few tips to keep in mind before you get started.

1. Take baby steps.

It's very easy to want to jump right in and overload yourself with all kinds of different spiritual practices that will help you live and love like Jesus, but the error of jumping into this pool instead of wading in is that you might end up drowning. If you try and do too much at once, you might end up not doing anything of it. Small steps are better than no steps at all.

2. Be specific.

When creating your rule, be concrete. Get practical. For example, instead of saying, "I will read the Bible," say, "I will spend 15 minutes every morning in the Word."

3. Think holistically.

As humans, we consist of a mental side, an emotional side, a spiritual side, a relational side, and a physical side. We are holistic. We are more than just our feelings. We are more than just our thoughts. We are more than just matter. When crafting your rule of life, be sure to include practices that will impact ALL OF YOU, not just your spiritual life or not just your emotional life, etc.

4. Remember this is a working document.

Just as a budget can be adjusted depending on your needs or the season or circumstances, so too, can your rule of life be flexible and change as necessary. Allow it to be fluid when you need it to be.

5. Focus on the goal.

The goal of designing a rule of life is not to burden you with a bunch of stuff to do. The goal of crafting a rule of life is to help you align your life with the way of Jesus in order to help you love God, love people, and make disciples.

FIRST THINGS

Ok, are you ready? Let's jump in. Reflect on the questions below and use the allotted space to jot down your answers or write them in a journal.

When/where do I feel closest to God? What practices naturally draw me towards him (i.e. daily devotion, prayer, sharing my story, living in community, Sabbath, silence and solitude, fasting, generosity, simplicity, etc.)?

What is most important to me? Who do I want to become? Based on my looking back at 2019, what has (realistically) received most of my attention?

Where do I want to change? Where do I feel powerless to change?

Write a prayer to God expressing your heart, your intent, and your desire to be shaped into Jesus' image. Invite the Holy Spirit to help lead and guide you on this journey.

FIRST THINGS

Based on your answers use the chart below to start filling in your daily, weekly, monthly and yearly rhythms. Choose some categories where you want to focus that allow for a holistic approach and write them across the top as you begin (i.e. body, relationships, money, spiritual health, etc.)

Goal: The goal of crafting a rule of life is to help you align your life with the way of Jesus in order to help love God, love people, and make disciples.

Category:						
Daily						
Weekly						
Monthly						
Quarterly						
Annually						

