

---

## The Masculinist #6: How to Establish a Consistent Prayer Life

---

Aaron M. Renn <arenn@urbanophile.com>  
To: "Aaron M. Renn" <arenn@urbanophile.com>

Sun, Feb 12, 2017 at 1:14 PM



Welcome back to the Masculinist, the monthly email newsletter targeted at the problems facing men in society, and building up the men of the church. This is the newsletter that I can promise you will frequently very much not be a safe space.

If someone forwarded this to you, you can subscribe at this link: <http://www.urbanophile.com/masculinist/>

One of my guiding principles is to build up, not just year down. So I alternate issues devoted to hard hitting cultural commentary with ones that give practical, actionable advice that can help you and other men improve your life. Today's issue is about how to establish and maintain a daily prayer life.

### The Challenge of Change

Everybody knows New Year's resolutions are hard to keep. The sad reality is that personal change is very hard and very few people really change.

This personal inability to change is often masked by the big changes that come from outside forces. For example, we all change radically as we age. Someone in his 40s who doesn't go out and party hard anymore isn't someone made change happen. He just got older.

There are other changes that come from things outside our control. For example, we may have grown more resilient as a person because we had a serious illness, but that's not much credit to ourselves. We were forced through the experience. So too with changes driven by fashion trends.

It's much more rare for someone to implement material life changes as a result of a conscious change program. Most of our attempts fail or lack staying power.

This helps explain why so many Christian men fail to develop a daily prayer life, even though nothing is arguably more important to the Christian life.

### The Importance of Prayer

The criticality of daily, frequent prayer for the Christian cannot be overstated. The Bible gives numerous injunctions on the topic:

“Pray without ceasing” – 1 Thess 5:17

“With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints” – Eph. 6:18

“Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” – Matt. 26:41

“Be rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer” – Rom. 12:12

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” – Philippians 4:6

During the time of Christ’s ministry it’s notable that he frequently withdrew to pray, while his hapless disciples did not. Yet after his resurrection they became prayer fanatics. When they gathered in the upper room after his ascension and before the coming of the Holy Spirit, they “all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). As the church was growing, the twelve apostles appointed deacons to provide meals to the widows so that they could “devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4) which gives a powerful demonstration of what they thought it was most important for them to be doing personally.

Yet despite this, it’s a continuous struggle for men to develop a prayer life.

As it happens, I have had an extensive daily prayer life for six years. In fact, I was praying 1-2 hours per day for several of those years. So I have some insights to share on how to make this happen.

## Failed Approaches

Every person is different. There’s no one size fits all recipe for change. But what I’ve noticed is that failed change often starts with trying to implement a fairly complex program or comprehensive overhaul like the P90X exercise program or the Whole 30 diet.

The problem isn’t that these are bad. In fact, I’ve done P90X myself and enjoyed it. The challenge is that these are often not designed as long-term maintenance programs (P90X certainly isn’t), are very complicated and time consuming, and too rapid in their attempt to change many facets of behavior at once. Typically even people who do these successfully often fall away from them after a while.

## The Ratchet

I have had better luck implementing change through a process I call “the ratchet.” The ratchet involves continuously making incremental small changes – ratcheting the change up slowly over time – until cumulatively major change has occurred.

For example, a few years ago I found myself out of shape. I also had some very different ideas about what my fitness goals actually were than I had previously. I’d been a lifelong runner. And while I wanted to continue with cardio, I wanted to focus on building muscle and strength too. I really hadn’t done that before.

I started by doing a simple ten pushups a day. That was it. Ten pushups every day.

I slowly increased the number over time, to twelve, to 15, etc.

Next I added in ten sit-ups, and started increasing that.

As I got more and more acclimated and routinized in my existing workout, I’d add another exercise to it – planks, oblique v-ups, deep knee bends – etc. Eventually I added some dumbbell work. As the length grew I split into to multiple workouts, with leg day, bicep day, etc.

Eventually I started seeing real progress. The greatest moment of this was when, for the first time in my life, I could do an unassisted pull-up.

I’ve done the same sort of ratchet approach for other things, such as changing my diet, my supplement routine, etc. I also used it to build up my podcast. I started just doing intermittent interviews using my iPhone. Then I officially labeled it a podcast integrated with Soundcloud and iTunes. Then I had some “cover art” created. Then I added in some post-production techniques (e.g., noise removal). Then I bought a better microphone. There’s still plenty more I can add to this, such as intro/outro music, video, better multi-mic mixing, etc. The key is that I didn’t try to make the leap to professional grade all at once. I started with the bare minimum, and continuously improved over time. (You can check out my podcast on [iTunes](#) and [Soundcloud](#)).

Now I’ll admit I have made some major systemic transitions. When I moved to NYC I had to reinvent all of my daily patterns around my new life anyway, so I changed from a largely bodyweight/dumbbell system to barbell strength training using a [Starting Strength](#) style protocol. I’ve kept that up for about two years now, so I’ve had staying power

on it. Of course, Starting Strength is a “fashion” (like Crossfit), which made it easier, at least initially, since I was in a sense joining a tribe too.

## **Building A Morning Routine With Prayer**

As I said, I prayed 1-2 hours a day for several years. I started doing this for the same reason most people would – desperation when things were going poorly in my life. This streak continued for a while, alas. This was change imposed from the outside, so of limited credit to me. And I was working independently and so controlled my entire schedule, which made it easier.

When I came to NYC, however, I was going to have a full time, regular business hours job. So I needed to find a way to refactor what I was doing to fit into a more fixed schedule, and one with less free time.

I did this by integrating prayer into an overall morning routine. Given how crazy all of our lives can be, this is the only part of our day most of us have in which we can somewhat control our schedule. So it's the ideal place to make sure we allocate time to pray.

Morning also already includes many items such as taking a shower, brushing our teeth, and getting dressed that are fixed points we can anchor off of. These are also physical actions, and thus can trigger an almost Pavlovian response to the next step in our routine as we do them.

Using these as initial anchor points, I started adding items to my morning routine until I built up a structure that gets me ready for the day. Included in this is prayer. Because it's integrated with things like getting dressed, I now do it almost automatically without thinking. I don't have to remember to pray. It's just automatically the next step in my day.

Here are the basics of the morning routine that I established, which was built up over time using the ratchet technique.

- Get up
- Brush teeth
- Weigh in (I have kept a daily log with my weight and other things for over a decade).
- Make bed
- Do 25 decline pushups from edge of bed
- Take morning supplements (today that's 5000iu of Vitamin D-3, and 500mg of Vitamin C)
- Do five posture stretches (basically chest expansions, but with a more overhead stretch)
- Say personal prayers
  - Thanks
  - Pray over events of day
  - Personal conduct (“Walk in a manner worth of the calling with which you've been called”)
  - Lord's Prayer
- Shower and dress
- Read Bible (generally 1-3 chapters, reading through various books)
- Say intercessionary prayers during commute to work

Again, the idea is not for you to replicate this list, but to build up over time, bit by bit, a routine that works for you, and which integrates prayer into the physical process of getting ready. Physical action triggers definitely help.

## **A Few Miscellaneous Tips**

One nice thing about using the ratchet technique is that you can evaluate each new thing you add to your routine to see if it works or add value. If it doesn't, you can drop it. I've definitely dropped things out of my routine. I experimented with various supplements. If they didn't do anything for me or if my view of them changed after further research, I dropped them.

I also had to make changes to accommodate life changes. After I got married, I stopped making the bed.

The other thing I do is that I have a pretty standard list of prayers I go through every day. The things I'm thankful for and the events of my day are always different, but the rest of it is pretty much the same. I've noticed that Protestants have an almost allergic aversion to prayers that are formulaic or repetitive. It seems too Catholic. But this is one where the Catholics have got it right. Very few people are capable of coming up with unique prayer compositions and topics every single morning. I'm not ashamed to run through the same list – which I do update over time using, you guessed

it, my ratchet technique – every day. And I also do in fact ritually recite the Lord’s Prayer, something for which I’m not at all ashamed.

Don't be afraid to repeat yourself every day. Let's admit it. The problem isn't repetition. It's that too many Christians aren't praying at all. Worry about repeating yourself when you've actually got something to worry about repeating.

Also, don't be afraid to borrow ideas from elsewhere and see if they work for you. I'm always looking for new ideas from other people to try. I took the pushup and posture stretch ideas from a guy on the internet, Mike Cernovich. Yes, he's controversial. But his [posture stretches](#) work. Making the bed promptly and daily I took from this [famous commencement speech](#) by a Navy SEAL admiral. I decided to apply his advice literally, and found it useful.

There are a few things I haven't done personally and so can't vouch for, but which I know others have found useful. A friend of mine has ADHD and had a terrible time getting a morning routine going. He found a daily routine Android app called [Fabulous](#) that helped him crack the code on it. You might want to check that out. There are many other apps too.

Everybody is different. What worked for me might not work for you. But you need to find something. The most important thing to do is just to start – start with something, anything. That's the essence of the ratchet technique. Better to do what you can right away, rather than trying to nail perfection out of the gate. If all you can do is look at yourself in the mirror after brushing your teeth and recite the Lord's Prayer, do that.

Start praying something and figure out how to make it a habit, preferably in the morning and preferable anchored onto a physical activity you are already going to do anyway that can be used as a trigger. Once you can do that, take the next step.

Good luck.

## In the Culture

Dennis Prager is a politically conservative culture commentator (Jewish, not Christian, but reasonably simpatico on many cultural questions). One of his projects is something called “Prager University,” which produces five minute videos with various social or political messages.

A recent installment featured Jim Geraghty of the National Review claiming that “[Ward Cleaver is the sexiest man alive](#).” It's basically yet another “Man up!” message, telling men they need to be responsible adults, workers, husbands, fathers. He says directly men should emulate Ward Cleaver and other TV dads of that era.

Of course the question he doesn't address is where Ward will find a June to marry. It isn't reasonable to expect to expect any man to behave like Ward in a world without any Junes.

Geraghty and men like him are happy lecturing men about how they should be Ward Cleaver. But strangely enough, they never seem to encourage women to act like June. That would seem to be a big hole in their societal change strategy.

So are Geraghty and the many church leaders who are always hectoring men willing to explicitly make that call to women? If not, why not? We already know the answer to the first question, because they never actually do it. The answer to the second question will tell you everything you need to know about why they've been such failures in their quest to change men.

## Noteworthy

I [wrote an essay](#) inspired by Martin Scorsese's new film Silence (and by the book it is based on).

NBC News: China [tackles a “masculinity crisis”](#) of “effeminate boys.”

A guy in the Huffington Post [brags about having a maiden name](#). “I married my wife on May 29th, 2016, and as of that day, I have legally changed my name to match hers. This decision was made over many months and many, many conversations. I share this story so that others can explore how I felt throughout the process on their own time, because I'm sure it will scare the shit out of many as it definitely has for me. The brief explanation of why goes like this: She hadn't considered changing her last name from Broberg. I felt strongly about our family having a shared

surname. That's it. I proposed my name change to hers.”

A [new study](#) from the Institute for Family Studies shows that children born to cohabitating parents experience more family instability than those born to married parents. Seems obvious to me.

And Barna is out with a [new survey](#) about trends in mating and romance. There have been profound shifts in behavior, particularly the increasing age of marriage.

For instance, between 2000 and 2016, the relational makeup of those aged between 25 and 39 shifted dramatically. In the 16 years since 2000, the amount of single people in the 25-29 range rose 9 percentage points (from 50% percent to 59%), and the amount of single people in the 30-39 range also rose 10 percentage points (from 24% to 34%). From a different angle, during the same time period, those groups saw similar shifts in the number of those married. In the 16 years since 2000, the amount of people married in the 25-29 range dropped 7 percentage points (from 43% to 36%), and the amount of people married in the 30-39 range dropped 8 percentage points (from 65% to 57%). These are massive shifts, most pronounced among those in their twenties and thirties, toward a broader move to delay marriage among younger Americans. If you were in your late twenties in the year 2000, you were much more likely to be married than if you were that same age today. These figures are staggering considering the relatively short time period in which they occur.

The stat to keep an eye on is the percentage of people unmarried at age 40. Right now my impression in the US is that most people still end up getting married by that age. I think in parts of Asia, significantly growing percentages of people are still not married by 40. This is a big cutoff time for women especially, since having children can become very difficult at that age. In my view, failure to marry by age 40 means that in some sense you "missed the runway," at least for those who want marriage (which is most people). Having a first marriage later in life seems to be something of a much different character than getting married during childbearing years, even if children aren't in the picture.

## Coda

“Young men have strong passions, and tend to gratify them indiscriminately. Of the bodily desires, it is the sexual by which they are most swayed and in which they show absence of self-control. They are changeable and fickle in their desires, which are violent while they last, but quickly over: their impulses are keen but not deep-rooted, and are like sick people's attacks of hunger and thirst. They are hot-tempered and quick-tempered, and apt to give way to their anger; bad temper often gets the better of them, for owing to their love of honor they cannot bear being slighted, and are indignant if they imagine themselves unfairly treated. While they love honor, they love victory still more; for youth is eager for superiority over others, and victory is one form of this. They love both more than they love money, which indeed they love very little, not having yet learnt what it means to be without it—this is the point of Pittacus' remark about Amphiarus. They look at the good side rather than the bad, not having yet witnessed many instances of wickedness. They trust others readily, because they have not yet often been cheated. They are sanguine; nature warms their blood as though with excess of wine; and besides that, they have as yet met with few disappointments. Their lives are mainly spent not in memory but in expectation; for expectation refers to the future, memory to the past, and youth has a long future before it and a short past behind it: on the first day of one's life one has nothing at all to remember, and can only look forward. They are easily cheated, owing to the sanguine disposition just mentioned. Their hot tempers and hopeful dispositions make them more courageous than older men are; the hot temper prevents fear, and the hopeful disposition creates confidence; we cannot feel fear so long as we are feeling angry, and any expectation of good makes us confident. They are shy, accepting the rules of society in which they have been trained, and not yet believing in any other standard of honor. They have exalted notions, because they have not yet been humbled by life or learnt its necessary limitations; moreover, their hopeful disposition makes them think themselves equal to great things—and that means having exalted notions. They would always rather do noble deeds than useful ones: their lives are regulated more by moral feeling than by reasoning; and whereas reasoning leads us to choose what is useful, moral goodness leads us to choose what is noble. They are fonder of their friends, intimates, and companions than older men are, because they like spending their days in the company of others, and have not yet come to value either their friends or anything else by their usefulness to themselves. All their mistakes are in the direction of doing things excessively and vehemently. They disobey Chilon's precept by overdoing everything; they love too much and hate too much, and the same with everything else. They think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it; this, in fact, is why they overdo everything. If they do wrong to others, it is because they mean to insult them, not to do them actual harm. They are ready to pity others, because they think every one an honest man, or anyhow better than he is: they judge their neighbor by their own harmless natures, and so cannot think he deserves to be treated in that way. They are fond of fun and therefore witty, wit being well-bred insolence.”

PO Box 231028  
New York NY 10023  
USA

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Change Subscriber Options](#)