

The 7 Rhythms – Bible Reflection (Deuteronomy 17:14-20)

Sonrise Church • Jan 14, 2024 • www.isonrise.com

As a staff, we felt it was important for us in 2024 to promote the seven spiritual rhythms that are essential to walking the Christian life. These are the seven spiritual rhythms we cover in our 10-week discipleship journey. As of right now, 230 plus people of walked through that journey with us and we have another 30 joining us in our current term. We wanted the whole church to learn about these rhythms. This doesn't mean that the coming sermon series will replace going through the Journey. To fully experience these rhythms you need to be in the community of a small group. Our strategy as we cover each rhythm is to have a culminating experience at the end of the month to allow you to put what you have learned into practice. Think of it like a lecture and a lab. In a lecture, you get the content and in the lab, you put things into practice. We know the lab is truly the greater learning environment. Today, we are talking about the first spiritual rhythm which is fundamental to all the rest. Let me start our conversation today with a question.

What habits are you seeking to add to your life in this new year? I hope that you are evaluating how last year turned out for you. I hope that you are finding things to rejoice about and things you want to do better. I am optimistic for you that this evaluation time will lead you to consider making some adjustments. Maybe you are currently thinking about the habits you need to introduce into your schedule in order to have a healthier 2024.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to find one habit that would help you be more emotionally, spiritually, financially, and relationally healthier? Maybe you have considered how making a physical fitness goal will affect multiple areas of your life. Or, maybe you have decided to focus on strengthening your friendships and feel this improvement will have holistic benefits.

I want to make the case to you this morning that there is one habit that will bring holistic health to your life. This habit won't surprise you. You probably feel that you can guess where I am going. This habit is not novel, but sadly it is neglected. In fact, 26 million people mostly or completely stopped this habit since the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the sharpest decline we have witnessed in recent years. The pandemic was devastating, but the long-term effects of the decline of this habit will be more significant.

Big Idea: Holy words are the healthiest habit. Reflecting on the Bible several times a week will help you be more emotionally, spiritually, financially, and relationally healthy. It will not eliminate hardship from your life completely, but it will drastically affect your perspective, which will in turn change your experience. Reading and obeying God's word will not only allow you to flourish as a person but it will also create an environment for those around you to flourish. This one habit will change you and have a positive ripple effect on those around you. Let me show you how important holy words are to our overall health. I want to look at the instructions Moses gave to the kings of Israel to see how vital "holy words" are to our health.

First, Moses will tell God's people about the unhealthy habits a king must avoid. Interestingly, these habits were considered as essential for the success of any king in the Ancient Near East. This reminds us that our evaluation of healthy habits can be misguided. Let's look at the unhealthy habits Moses listed.

Deuteronomy 17:14-17, ¹⁴ "When you come to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me, ¹⁵ you may indeed set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. ¹⁶ Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You shall never return that way again. ¹⁷ And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold."

In verses 16 and 17, God, through the words of Moses, told the people the habits he wanted his kings to avoid. Moses was preparing the people for a day that wouldn't happen for over 350 years. The people of God had plenty of time to ponder these words before they requested a king. Moses says that the king should not "acquire many horses." The meaning of "many horses" is easily lost on the modern reader. We view horses as domesticated animals for enjoyment or well-trained aids for ranchers. In the ancient world, they were a sign of military strength. We can modernize Moses' prohibition as "he must not acquire many tanks, nuclear warheads, or military drones." The king was forbidden to rely heavily on military power. Israel had an army, but its source of strength was not primarily found in it.

The next restriction also requires the modern reader to look deeper into the historical significance of what is prohibited. Moses says that the king should not "acquire many wives." It is easy to see the building of a "harem" as a means to satisfy sexual perversion. Sexual pleasure played a part in the formation of a harem, but there was a more significant advantage that it gave to a king in that era. Members of the harem represented political alliances with other nations. The idea was that one was less likely to fight family than non-family. I don't know if that principle is still thought of as valid today. In the Ancient Near East, a king giving or taking a foreign king's daughter would ensure positive foreign relations in trade and military campaigns. If you wanted to succeed as a king, you needed to have healthy alliances with the powers around you. God wanted to remind his people that human alliances were not as valuable as divine allegiance.

Lastly, Moses warned against the accumulation of wealth. We don't need a lot of historical help to understand this point. Wealth in both the ancient and modern world was and is a source of power. More money gives you more access to more resources. A bankrupt government weakens a nation.

Surprisingly, Moses' prohibitions were the playbook for royal power in his time. A king needed military, political, and economic power to provide and protect his people. How could his people possibly prosper without these things? Every king needed to be obsessed with

making gains in these areas to ensure his people were cared for and that he had a long reign. Moses completely overturns the current perspective of his day. The healthiest habit for the king was not related to building military strength, political advantage, or economic prosperity. Moses believed that there was one habit the king needed to place at the top of his priorities. This one habit would ensure that the king had a long and healthy reign.

The future history of Israel's kings would prove the danger of disregarding these prohibitions. 350 years later Samuel warned the people that King Saul would violate these commands and prove to be a terrible king. King Solomon broke each of these commands in extravagant ways, which resulted in the nation of Israel being divided into the northern and southern kingdoms. According to the standards of the surrounding nations, Solomon looked like a great king, but, in God's eyes, he was not. Sadly, he and his people suffered the consequences of his negligence.

The king carried a heavy burden and was under great pressure to care for the welfare of his people. Moses didn't hide the key to a king's success. He didn't keep prosperity clouded in mystery. He revealed the key habit that would lead to a healthy reign. This is the same habit we need in our lives to give us holistic health.

Deuteronomy 17:18-20, "18 And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. 19 And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, 20 that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel."

Moses instructed the king to reflect on God's law and obey it. The king was required to not only learn God's law but to live under it. The king here is not placed above the law but under the law. The priests held the king accountable to a pure copy of the Law. The priest had the original text so they could compare it to the king's copy to validate its legitimacy. This was a separation of powers that created transparency and accountability.

This copy of God's law, which is most likely the book of Deuteronomy, was to be at the King's side and read aloud. These actions are similar to the practices that were common in the Suzerian treaties of the Ancient Near East. The vassal king, who was the resident king under the authority of a foreign king, was given a duplicate copy of the covenant or treaty and it was read out loud periodically. This public reading reminded the king and his subjects who the ultimate authority was. God wanted the king and the people to recognize him as their ultimate authority.

The positive effects of this habit of living under God's holy words would bring health to the king and those in his kingdom. Moses said that rejecting and obeying God's words would keep the king's heart from being "lifted up above his brothers." The king would be a "public servant" and not a tyrant. He would think of the welfare of his people and not think of himself

as intrinsically superior. The people would flourish with such a humble and holy leader. The king himself would benefit from this holy habit. He would live long in the land the Lord had given his people. His longevity was connected to his loyalty to the holy words of God.

Holy words are the healthiest habit. This was true for the kings of Israel and is true for us today. If we want to experience “good” in our lives we need to follow God’s words. These words are not always easy to follow, but they are the only way to experience good in our lives. Moses included all of the people of Israel when he spoke of the positive effects of obeying God’s word. *Deuteronomy 10:12-13*, ¹² *And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,* ¹³ *and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good?* Your loyalty to God’s word is “for your good.”

When I was reflecting on this passage, I thought of the movie “Back to the Future 2.” That may sound strange, but let me explain. In “Back to the Future 2” the bad guy, Biff, gets his hands on a Sports Almanac that records the scores of the major sporting events from 1950 to 2000. The book was purchased by Marty McFly in 2015, but it got into Biff’s hands in 1955. Biff uses the book to change his future by placing bets on the teams he knows are going to win according to the Sports Almanac from the future. Imagine how you could change your life with a book that predicted the future. Imagine if you had access to a book that told you the outcome of all things and how to align your life to receive the ultimate good. Biff kept that book by his side and used it to shape the course of his life. The Bible is better than Biff’s book. How you handle this book will shape your destiny.

Set a goal this year to improve your habit of reflecting on God’s word. I want to give you a practical and specific challenge this week. This is a habit I have started in my life since going through our 10-week discipleship journey. Martye, our groups director, and I were reflecting on this habit and how it has really impacted our spiritual growth recently. Shereen, who is one of our trustees and recently spoke at Coffee and Conversations, also uses this practice when she studies God’s word. I am sure that many in our church also find this practice I am going to share with you helpful. My challenge is that you slow down your bible reading, so you can reflect on what you are reading more. My challenge is that you read one chapter, pick one verse, write that verse down, and pray that verse. This practice has been one of the most profitable habits for my personal spiritual growth that I have ever tried. Try it for 30 days and tell me how it goes.

Maybe you are not yet committed to Jesus, but you are curious about following him. I encourage you to take on this same challenge. The Bible is the most influential book in human history. One can not understand the history of humanity without learning about the impact of this book. In reading this book I think you will find more than something of historical significance. I believe you will find the meaning of life and the purpose of your existence. Either way, what do you have to lose in reading it? At least, you will gain a better understanding of the shape of history. At best, you will connect with the creator of all things.

Life Level Application

- 1) **Head:** Read Joshua 1:1-9. What pressure do you believe Joshua felt after Moses' death? What was the determining factor for Joshua's future success? What was the intensity and frequency that Joshua was encouraged to have in reading God's word?

- 2) **Heart:** Read 1 Kings 11:9-13. How did Moses' warning in Deuteronomy 17:17 come true in Solomon's life? What were the consequences of Solomon's actions? What feelings do you think he experienced when he heard God's judgment?

- 3) **Hands:** Read 1 Samuel 8:10-18. What word did Samuel use repeatedly to describe the future king's actions? How does that differ from the posture of the king described in Deuteronomy 17:19-20?

- 4) **Habits:** How do you reflect on God's word throughout the week? What has been the most helpful practice or tool for you in studying God's word? What new goal can you set to increase your reflection on God's word in 2024?