

The Spiritual Discipline of Prayer

Introduction:

For many Christians prayer produces the same reaction as a complicated technological device for a person who has not been fully initiated to the world of high-tech. It seems to offer great potential, but at the same time the mastery of that potential seems beyond them. The result is that they employ it at a very low level of efficiency, or they abandon it altogether. This is not Christ's intention. He has given us prayer as a primary means of spiritual growth and of participation in the work of his Kingdom. Great rewards await the person who embraces the discipline of prayer. The intention of this study is not to do a systematic study of prayer, but to introduce prayer as a spiritual discipline. Our goals are:

- To help overcome obstacles that hinder the regular practice of prayer
- To make you more effective in prayer so that you will pray more and pray more effectively when you do pray

In order to do this we will discuss the following facts about prayer:

1. Prayer is a command
2. Prayer makes a difference
3. Bad prayer is possible
4. We learn to pray
5. Prayer is primarily relational
6. Prayer is a gift of the Holy Spirit

Prayer is a Command

The first and most fundamental reason why we should pray is that we are commanded to pray. As a child begins by simply obeying without necessarily understanding the reasons for his obedience we should begin to pray simply because it is the command of Christ:

Matthew 26:41 Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak.

Luke 11:9 And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

Luke 18:1 And he spake a parable unto them *to this end*, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

Romans 12:12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer;

Colossians 4:2 Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;

1 Thessalonians 5:17 Pray without ceasing.

Jacques Ellul in his book *Prayer and Modern Man*, after spending a hundred pages explaining modern man's reasons for not praying, gives what he considers to be the one reason to pray. He writes:

“Faced with the spiritual laziness and lukewarmness, with the errors and rationalizations which have been brought about in the lives of all Christians as well as in the churches, we know that Scripture comes to our aid with this command: if you live by the Spirit, then you go beyond the commandment. You are fulfilling the will of God. You are entering into the experience of the reality of truth, of all the spiritual rudiments.”

“That is all well and good, but in these times of dryness, of hardening, of morbidity, of despair, of alienation, of negation, of disobedience, of rejection, when there is nothing left ‘in our hearts’ which tells us to ‘seek his face,’ when the barriers of misunderstandings are accumulating between God and me, when I am precisely unable to act like the younger son in the parable, that is to say, to return to the Father, when I am ashamed to come back, and I let fear and remorse pile up between God and me which make a return seem impossible, when everything turns me away –where shall I find again any inward fervor, any enthusiasm for prayer?”

“No, at those times I have in fact to cling to ‘a reason’ outside myself, objective, which I find compelling, which pushes me along in other words, like a hand in my back forcing me ahead, constraining me to pray. It is the commandment which God in his mercy has granted to make up for the void in my heart and in my life. ‘Watch and pray’; that is the sole reason for praying which remains for modern man.”¹

We must remind ourselves that Christ always seeks our good that his commands are always for our good. He does nothing that is inutile. Our attempts at prayer to this point may seem like the disciples efforts at fishing in Luke 5:5 “We have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing.” If this is the case we must imitate the faith of Peter and say: “nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.” We must pray in faith in simple obedience to the command of Christ.

Prayer Makes a Difference

Prayer without expectation is like fishing in a swimming pool. I once read an account of a fishing club in Paris that always fished in a section of the Seine where they knew there

¹ Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man*, New York, Seabury Press, p. 101, 102

were no fish. Their explanation for this seemingly futile activity was that they fished not to catch fish, but as a philosophical exercise. If Bass Pro depended on philosophical fishermen, they would not exist. People fish because they expect to catch fish, and when the hope of catching fish becomes remote enthusiasm for fishing quickly wanes. In the same way we pray because we expect something to come of our praying, and when we lose that expectation it becomes impossible to maintain enthusiasm for prayer. Meister Eckhard the great 12th century mystic wrote: “When a man is looking for something, and he sees no sign of what he is looking for there where he is looking, he will perhaps continue to look, but without enthusiasm. If on the other hand he begins to find evidence for what he is looking for then he will begin to look seriously.” This is what is implied in Hebrews 11:6: “But without faith *it is* impossible to please *him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” Or as Simone Weil has stated: “waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.”

The enemies of this kind of expectant prayer are unbelief and an overly philosophical attitude towards prayer. In regards to the first the Bible speaks often of the relationship of prayer and faith. In Matt. 21:22 Jesus tells the disciples: “And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.” Or as James states in James 1:5 “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all *men* liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.” Faith, in this sense, is confidence. It is like the confidence or trust that we exercise in another person. It is the confidence of a child in his parent. This confidence is the fruit of experience. We have confidence to ask today because we asked yesterday and we were not refused. Lack of confidence makes us hesitant in asking. Hence, “Ye have not because ye ask not.” (James 4:2).

In regards to the second enemy of expectant prayer, an overly philosophical attitude, C. S. Lewis gives the following explanation:

“The case against prayer (I mean the ‘low’ or old fashioned kind) is this. The thing you ask for is either good—for you and for the world in general—or else it is not. If it is, then a good and wise God will do it anyway. If it is not, then He won’t. In neither case can your prayer make any difference. But if this argument is sound, surely it is an argument not only against praying, but against doing anything whatever?”

“In every action, just as in every prayer, you are trying to bring about a certain result; and this result may be good or bad. Why, then do we not argue as the opponents of prayer argue, and say that if the intended result is good God will bring it to pass without your interference, and that if it is bad He will prevent it happening whatever you do? Why wash your hands? If God intends them to be clean, they’ll come clean without washing them. If He doesn’t they’ll remain

dirty (as Lady Macbeth found) however much soap you use. Why ask for the salt? Why put on you boots? Why do anything?”²

Prayer, in the biblical sense, is, like work, a form of causality. It is one of the ways that God allows us to do his work and to bring about his will. As Lewis continues in the same essay:

“The two methods by which we are allowed to produce events may be called work and prayer. Both are alike in this respect—that in both we try to produce a state of affairs which God has not (or at any rate not yet) seen fit to provide ‘on His own.’ And from this point of view the old maxim *laborare est orare* (work is prayer) takes on a new meaning. What we do when we weed a field is not quite different from what we do when we pray for a good harvest. But there is an important difference all the same.”

“. . . The kind of causality we exercise by work is, so to speak, divinely guaranteed, and therefore ruthless. . . But the kind we exercise by prayer is not like that; God has left Himself discretionary power. Had he not done so, prayer would be an activity too dangerous for man and we should have the horrible state of things envisaged by Juvenal: ‘Enormous prayers which Heaven grants in anger.’³

It is good to remember as we come to prayer that simple motto that we used to find on the walls of Christian homes and in Sunday school classrooms: “Prayer changes things”. For without that confidence our motivation to pray will be too weak to overcome our too busy schedules. The desire to pray may remain as a quiet haunting thought hidden away in the remote recesses of our minds, but it will not be a priority that draws us away to the secret place where the living Christ awaits.

Bad Prayer is Possible

Not all words addressed to God constitute real prayer. Dag Hamerskold says: “The fact that we address our words to God does not mean that we have prayed” (*Markings*). This single fact should motivate us in our study of prayer. As F. L. Fisher has stated: “All men pray. Not all men pray aright. These two statements justify any effort that man may make to understand the nature and the way of prayer”⁴

The Bible often speaks of prayer that God does not hear. It speaks of prayer that comes from wrong motivation. Prayer is not magic. It is not getting the formula right in order to produce the desired result. This is the animistic concept of prayer. Neither is it religious ritual. Israel, in the Old Testament, and the Pharisees, in the Gospels, both made the mistake of confusing prayer and ritual. Finally prayer is not a means of getting

² C. S. Lewis, “Work and Prayer” *God in the Dock*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1976, p. 105

³ *Ibid.* p. 107

⁴ F. L. Fisher, *Prayer in the New Testament*, p. 7

what we want from God. It is rather the way that we discover God's will. Prayer in the biblical sense is always response. Our word is always second; it always follows the Word that God addresses to us. When we have received God's Word we may respond, but until we have heard the Word that God is addressing to us anything we say to Him will be inappropriate.

Let us consider some of the biblical passages that speak of prayer that God does not hear. We may begin with one that is well known:

“Come *and* hear, all ye that fear God,
and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.
I cried unto him with my mouth,
and he was extolled with my tongue.
If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear *me*:
But verily God hath heard *me*;
he hath attended to the voice of my prayer.” Psalm 66:16-19

The proper response to the Word of God is repentance. To “regard iniquity” in one's heart, or to “cherish iniquity” in one's heart (RSV) is to refuse the Word of God, to persist in the wrong way instead of accepting the way of repentance offered by the gracious Word of God. We see a historical example of this attitude in Israel's desire to have a king and their refusal to listen to the Word of God addressed to them by the prophet Samuel in I Samuel 8: 18-20:

“And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen; and the LORD will not hear you in that day. Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.”

Another example from the history of Israel is found at the time of the Babylonian conquest. In Jeremiah 11 God speaks to Jeremiah and tells him that Judah has violated the covenant, therefore judgment is coming, and when Israel cries out to Him He will not hear, and that Jeremiah, himself, is not to intercede on their behalf.

“And the LORD said unto me, a conspiracy is found among the men of Judah, and among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They are turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, which refused to hear my words; and they went after other gods to serve them: the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant which I made with their fathers. Therefore thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape; and though they shall cry unto me, I will not hearken unto them.” (Jer. 11:9-11).

“Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up a cry or prayer for them: for I will not hear *them* in the time that they cry unto me for their trouble. What hath my beloved to do in mine house, *seeing* she hath wrought lewdness with

many, and the holy flesh is passed from thee? When thou doest evil, then thou rejoicest.” (Jer. 11:14-15).

A second biblical reason for unanswered prayer is that it is insincere, a part of religious ritual, but divorced from any real desire for God. The Old Testament prophet often castigated Israel for the emptiness of their worship, and Jesus told the Pharisees that their prayer was an act of hypocrisy. We see this in the following passages:

“When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; *it is* iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear *them*. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.” (Isa. 1: 12 – 17).

“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” (Matt. 6:5-6)

If the prayer of the Pharisees is not heard because it is hypocritical, the prayer of the Gentiles is no better, because its motivation is magical manipulation.

“But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen *do*: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.” (Matt. 6: 7-8).

A final wrong reason for prayer is selfishness, praying not that the will of God might be accomplished, but that our will might be accomplished. It is this sort of prayer that James has in mind when he writes:

“From whence *come* wars and fightings among you? *Come they* not hence, *even* of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume *it* upon your

lusts. Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”

We Learn to Pray

Jesus taught his disciples to pray. As in all things he taught them first by example and then in words. In Luke 11:1 we are told as Jesus was praying one day in a certain place one of his disciples came to him and said: “Lord, teach us to pray.” It is in this context that Jesus gave them the Lord’s Prayer as a model for their own praying. Some might be surprised that the Christian needs to learn to pray. James Burtress explains why it is necessary:

“Lord, teach us to pray!’ So spoke the disciples to Jesus. In making this request, they confessed that they were not able to pray on their own, and that they had to learn to pray. The phrase ‘learning to pray’ sounds strange to us. If the heart does not overflow and begin to pray by itself, we say it will never ‘learn’ to pray. But it is a dangerous error, surely widespread among Christians, to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments—all which the heart can do by itself with prayer. And we confuse earth and heaven, man and God. Prayer does not mean simply to pour out one’s heart. It means rather to find the way to God and to speak with Him, whether the heart is full or empty. No man can do that by himself. For that he needs Jesus Christ.”⁵

It is not our purpose here to give a complete account of all that Jesus taught us about prayer, but only to make the point that we do learn to pray. But it would be worthwhile to mention some of the primary things that Jesus taught us about prayer. He is our example and teacher in the matter of prayer as in all other things. Before he came into the world people prayed. The Old Testament is filled with prayer and the Psalms have been the prayer book, not only of Israel, but of the church. But Jesus, himself, prayed as no one before him had ever prayed.

The following are among the most important things that Jesus taught us about prayer:

- Pray regularly and privately
- Pray to your Father (Abba)
- Seek the will of the Father
- Ask
- Give Thanks
- Confess and Forgive

⁵ James Burtress, *The Shaping of the Future: The Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

Pray Regularly and Privately

As a Jew Jesus came from a people who prayed. The custom of the Jews was to pray three times a day (Dan. 6:11); at sunrise, at three p.m., the time of the afternoon sacrifice at the temple, and in the evening before going to sleep. The basis of their prayers were the *Shéma* (Deut 6: 4-5) recited in the morning and evening, and the *Tephilla* (eighteen benedictions) recited at 3 p. m. and in the evening. To the *Tephilla* they added their personal petitions. The early church kept this practice of praying three times a day. “We find the three hours of prayer to be a firmly established practice. Didache 8:3, which says, referring to the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Three times a day you shall pray thus’, is particularly important. The Acts of the Apostles twice refers to the afternoon prayer at 3 p.m. (Acts 3:1; 10:3, 30). Paul also should be mentioned here. When he says that he prays ‘continually’, ‘without ceasing’, ‘always’, ‘day and night’, we are not to think of uninterrupted praying but of his observance of the regular hours of prayer. The phrase ‘to be instant in prayer’ (Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2) is to be understood in a similar way. The word that is employed here means ‘to faithfully observe a rite’ (as in Acts 1:14; 2:46: 6:4).”⁶

Jesus would have learned from a young age to observe these regular hours of prayer, but we see from the Gospels that he was not satisfied with simply “saying his prayers” three times a day, but rather that he regularly withdrew to private places and passed long periods of time in prayer. In doing this he was acting upon the principle that he teaches us in Matthew 6: 5-6: “ And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” In commenting on this passage and Jesus’ habits of prayer Oscar Cullmann has written the following:

“In the Gospels, Jesus himself sets an example in the choice of a place for his own prayer. The fact that the evangelists refer to this specially each time indicates that they recognized Jesus’ special intention to seek solitude, to be alone. Mark 1:35, ‘In the morning, a great while before the day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed’ (cf. Luke 4:42); Matt. 14:13, ‘he withdrew to a lonely place’; Luke 5:16, ‘he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed’; Luke 9:18, ‘When he was praying alone’; Luke 9:28, ‘He went up into the mountain to pray’ (Mark 9:2 and Matt. 17:1 ‘a high mountain apart’). Jesus also seeks the solitude of the hills (Mark 3:13; Luke 6:12; Mark 6:46; Matt. 14:23) on the Mount of Olives. Luke 22:39 observes that he went there ‘as was his custom’. The disciples follow him into Gethsemane, but then he himself goes ‘a little

⁶ Jochaim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, p. 79

farther', Mark 14:35; Matt. 26:39; according to Luke 22:41 'he withdrew from them about a stone's throw to pray.'⁷

The first lesson in Jesus' school of prayer is to withdraw regularly to a private place and pray. Henri Nouwen has written: "No one who seriously wants to live a life of prayer can persevere in that desire and realize it to some degree without a very concrete way. It may be necessary to make many changes in direction and to explore new ways as life develops, but without any way we won't arrive anywhere."⁸ D.M. McIntyre writes: "The equipment for the inner life of prayer is simple if not always easily secured. It consists particularly of a quiet place, a quiet hour, and a quiet heart."⁹ Concerning the last of these three things which is perhaps the most difficult to find we again quote Nouwen:

"Being useless and silent in the presence of our God belongs to the core of all prayer. In the beginning we often hear our own unruly inner noises more loudly than God's voice. This is at times very hard to tolerate. But slowly very slowly, we discover that the silent time makes us quiet and deepens our awareness of ourselves and God. Then, very soon, we start missing these moments when we are deprived of them, and before we are fully aware of it an inner momentum has developed that draws us more and more into silence and closer to that still point where God speaks to us."¹⁰

So we must regularly go to the private place away from the noise of the world to seek silence where we may hear the Father speak and respond to Him as a child to a parent. We may conclude this section with a final quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who writes:

"There is an indifferent, or even negative attitude toward silence which sees it as a disparagement of God's revelation in the Word. This is the view which misinterprets silence as a ceremonial gesture as a mystical desire to get beyond the Word. This is to miss the essential relationship of silence to the Word. Silence is the simple stillness of the individual under the Word of God. We are silent before the Word because our thoughts are already directed to the Word, as a child is quiet when he enters his father's room. We are silent after hearing the Word because the word is still speaking and dwelling within us. We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep because the last word belongs to God. We keep silence solely for the sake of the Word, and therefore not in order to show disregard for the word but rather to honor and receive it."¹¹

⁷ Oscar Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament*, p. 18

⁸ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, p. 134

⁹ D. M. McIntyre, *The Hidden Life of Prayer*, p. 30

¹⁰ Nouwen, *op. cit.* p. 136

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 79

Pray to your Father (Abba)

Christians address God as “Father”. It would indeed seem strange to us to address Him any other way. This was not the case before Jesus. While the Old Testament sometimes speaks of God as “Father”, people do not pray to Him as Father. God is referred to as “Father” only fifteen times in the Old Testament, while in the New Testament it is the normal way of referring to Him. This change is attributable directly to Jesus. We may summarize what we are saying with the following two quotes from the most detailed study of the subject ever made:

“We can say quite definitely that there is *no analogy at all* in the whole literature of Jewish prayer for God being addressed as *Abba*.”

“For Jesus to address God as ‘my Father’ is something new.”¹²

In order to fully appreciate what has just been established we need to consider the following points:

- What did Jesus mean when he addressed God as “Father” or “My Father”?
- What did he mean when he taught us to address God as “our Father”?
- What are the implications for us when we come to God as “our Father”?

With the exception of Jesus’ cry of desolation from the cross: “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me” (Mark 15:34 par.), which he quotes directly from Psalm 2:1, Jesus always addresses God as “Father” when he prays. There are sixteen recorded prayers of Jesus in the Gospels (21 including parallels), and in each case, except for the passage already noted, Jesus addresses God as “Father”.¹³

We may begin with Mark 14:36: “And he said, Abba, Father, all things *are* possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.” In this passage we see something that occurs on other occasions in Mark’s Gospel. He states the original Aramaic words of Jesus and then translates them into Greek for his readers, many who would not have understood Aramaic, the first language of the Palestinian Jews and the language normally used by Jesus. By this we know that “Abba” was the word that Jesus used to speak to God when he prayed, and each time we read “Father” (Greek *patros*) in the prayers of Jesus we should understand it as “Abba”. Jeremias points out that “Abba’ is a colloquialism originally stemming from the language of children”¹⁴ It was the first word spoken by a child, not unlike our “dada” and “mama”. The Talmud says: “When a child experiences the taste of wheat (i.e. when it is weaned) it learns to say *abba* and *imma* (i.e. those are the first sound it makes).¹⁵

¹² Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, p. 57

¹³ The passages are: Mark 14:36 (par. Matt. 26:39; Luke 22:42), Matt. 6:9 (par. Luke 11:2); 11:25, 26 (par. Luke 10 : 21), Luke 23 : 34, 46, Matt. 26: 42 (repetition of 26:39 par. Mark 14:36), John 11:41; 12:27; 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24, 25.

¹⁴ Jeremias, *op. cit.* p. 78

¹⁵ *b. Ber. 40a* quoted by Jeremias p. 65

It is evident from the rest of the New Testament and from early Christian literature that the word *Abba* was quickly adopted into the prayer language of not only Palestinian Christians, but also of Gentile Christian. In the same way as other Aramaic prayer words like *Hosana*, *Hallelujah*, *Amen*, and *Maranatha*, *Abba* became the primary way of addressing God not only among Aramaic speaking Christians, but also in the Greek speaking church. This is evidenced from two passages in Paul's letters. Galatians 4:6 says: "And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, *Abba*, Father." Romans 8:15-16 state: "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, *Abba*, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God". "Both remarks show how the cry of '*abba*' is beyond all human capabilities, and is only possible within the new relationship with God given by the Son. It is effected by God himself through the Spirit and actualizes the divine sonship whenever it is spoken. Or to put it more simply: whenever you cry *abba* – Paul says to his readers in each passage in the same way—God assures you that you are really his children."¹⁶

There is a sense in which Jesus' use of the term is unique. He is the "only-begotten" Son and shares an intimacy with the Father from all eternity that can never be duplicated in human experience. We are, nevertheless, sons of God by adoption, and the Spirit of adoption teaches us the Father's name. Jesus teaches us that we may have a relation with God in prayer that far surpasses anything that had been known before his coming.

We may close this section by discussing the implications of Jesus' teaching us to address the Father as *abba*. The first thing to be said is that prayer should be like an intimate conversation between a trusting child and a beloved Father. The Father knows what we need, but it delights him for us to ask. Nothing is too large or too small to discuss with him. The second thing is that he is a wise father. He is, in fact, all-wise. Human fathers with the best intentions still make mistakes even to the point of misleading their children. The heavenly Father never misleads us. We must trust him. Finally let it be said that the father image is difficult for some because of their experience with the human father. In these cases they must simply let the Spirit of Adoption heal the wounds of experience and teach them the name of the one who never disappoints.

Seek the Will of the Father

The prayer that Jesus taught us to pray begins: "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done." That Jesus followed the same pattern in his own praying is demonstrated by his prayer of renunciation in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prays: "Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee: take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 15:36). In his hour of greatest distress, when he most wanted the will of the Father to be other than what it was, Jesus was able to submit his own will to the will of the Father because of his

¹⁶ Jeremias, op. cit. p. 65

absolute confidence in Him. It is with this submission to the will of the Father that prayer begins. Karl Barth writes that: “the liberty, the joy, and the certainty of the other requests depend on these first three requests. All that we ask of God presupposes that we have first asked to participate in God’s cause.”¹⁷ Prayer is not just the means whereby each person gets what he or she wants, it is the means by which the will of the all-wise God is accomplished in the world. It is for this reason that prayer must be understood as listening, before it is understood as speaking. As we have previously stated it is not a first word, but a second word, a response to the Word of God. The first activity of prayer is to seek the will of the Father.

Ask

The verb that is perhaps most associated with Jesus’ teaching on prayer is the verb “ask”. In response to the request of the disciples in Luke 11:1 to teach them to pray Jesus gives them three things: the Lord’s Prayer, the parable of the friend at midnight, and the parable of the son who asks for bread. The two parables are linked by the exhortation in verse 9: “Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”

The point of the first parable is that God is not insensitive to our needs. We do not inconvenience Him by asking. Therefore we should not hesitate to make our needs known to Him. “We have not because we ask not” (James 4:2). The second parable is a parable of contrast. “If ye being good know how to give good gifts to you children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him” (Luke 11: 13). Some seem genuinely afraid to pray. They fear that if they sincerely seek the will of God, God will give them a stone or a scorpion. Our asking is upheld by our knowledge of the character of God who is both perfectly wise and unalterably good. God’s will is never contrary to our good.

Give Thanks

Christian prayer is filled with thanksgiving. Almost all of Paul’s letters begin with prayers of gratitude to God. He exhorts the Philippian believers to “be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God” (Philippians 4:6). In Romans 1:21 he tells us that the beginning of the downfall into sin is a lack of thankfulness. Nothing opens our hearts to God like gratitude. It is good to use the thanksgiving Psalms (9, 18, 22, 32, 34, 40, 63, 92, 107, 116, 118, 138) as models of thanksgiving in our own praying. When Jesus prayed, he gave thanks to the Father (Matt. 11:25; John 11:41). Thanksgiving is the part of prayer that will continue throughout all eternity.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *La Priere*, p. 51

Confess and Forgive

Of all that Jesus taught us about prayer it is perhaps his teaching on the relation between prayer and forgiveness that we find the most difficult to understand. We may begin simply by comparing the differences in the fifth petition in Matthew and Luke. In Matthew we read: “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (ASV). The ASV correctly translates the Greek aorist as a past tense. The KJV, which is most familiar to us, translates it as a present: “as we forgive our debtors”. In Luke 11:6 we read: “And forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone that is indebted to us”. There are two basic differences between the two. Matthew has the words “debt” and “debtor”; Luke has the words “sins” and “everyone that is indebted to us”. This is not a contradiction and can be explained as two different translations of the Aramaic original. What is in view here is not literal debt, but sin considered as debt as illustrated in Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant in Matt. 18.

It is more difficult to grasp the difference in the use of tenses, and the relationship between God forgiving us, and our forgiving of others. In both cases we could be led to believe that our forgiveness by God is a result of our forgiving those who have sinned against us. Cullmann makes the case that the fact that Matthew has the past and Luke the present tense can be explained from a grammatical peculiarity of Hebrew and Aramaic. Without giving the technical details we can give his conclusion that “as we forgive” “relates to the past and to the present and even to the future”.¹⁸ God is a forgiving God. In Jesus we have experienced God’s forgiveness, which teaches us to forgive. We are not forgiven because we forgive, but we forgive because we have been forgiven. The person who refuses to forgive others demonstrates that he has not understood God’s forgiveness.

This reality is underscored by two other passages in Mathew’s Gospel. The first is 5:23-24 where Jesus states: “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.” The second is the parable of the unforgiving servant which Jesus told as a response to Peter’s question: “Lord if my brother offend me, how many times shall I forgive him?” (Matt. 18: 21-35). The main point of this parable is that nothing we can ever be called upon to forgive can be equal to what we have been forgiven.

Practically it is best to first focus on God’s forgiveness and our own need of forgiveness when we pray. Once we have realized the great debt that has been forgiven us we will have less trouble forgiving others.

¹⁸ Oscar Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament*,

Prayer is Primarily Relational

Matthew 6:6 “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.”

Prayer is above all else coming into the presence of the Father. It is listening first and then speaking. Our word of prayer should always be a word of response to what the Father is saying to us. There is a striking image of this communion in the invitation that Christ gives to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:14 where Jesus says: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” O. Hallesby begins his book *Prayer* with this verse. He writes of it:

“I doubt that I know of a passage in the whole Bible which throws greater light upon prayer than this one does. It is, it seems to me, the key which opens the door into the holy and blessed realm of prayer.”

“To pray is to let Jesus come into our hearts”¹⁹

In the Bible the table represents joyful fellowship. This is what prayer should be joyful fellowship with the triune God. Notice in this text that we do not have to invite Christ in or implore him to come in. He is as near to us as the air we breathe. We must simply open the door. He desires our fellowship. Again we quote Hallesby who says: “To pray is nothing more involved than to let Jesus into our needs. To pray is to give Jesus permission to employ His powers in the alleviation of our distress. To pray is to let Jesus glorify His name in the midst of our needs.”²⁰

This being the case the effectiveness of our prayers does not depend upon the powers of the one who prays, but upon the presence of Christ. When we bring Christ into the midst of our distress, our incomprehension, and even our sin He can set things straight in ways that seem impossible to us. We must not be like someone embarrassed by a surprise visit who seeks to keep the visitor from seeing inside the house because he is embarrassed by the disorder. Christ comes to us as a humble housekeeper ready to set things in order if he must. We are never disappointed when we let him in.

In writing of this fear that makes us want to keep the door shut Diogenes Allen says: “One of the most important barriers to the spiritual life is that we tend to regard God as our opponent, not as our helper. This is understandable as we make progress in the spiritual life and become more aware of our inadequacies, we fear that God will make us

¹⁹ O. Hallesby, *Prayer*, p. 11

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 12-13

do something or give up doing something that we want to do. But God imposes nothing on us. To those who have come to dwell in God, God is patient and kind.”²¹

Disciplined times of prayer should be anticipated as time spent in fellowship with God. They should be looked forward to as times when order will be reestablished, sin revealed, and instruction given in how we are to love God and love our neighbor which are God’s two great commandments. It is no wonder that the Psalmists cry out so often for the presence of God.

The ancient Christians developed a four step approach to prayer that they called *lectio divina* that had as its goal a prayer that lets God into our lives. It can still be useful to us today. The four steps are: *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*. They may be described as follows:

Lectio. This is reading, not just any reading, but the reading of the Scriptures as the Word of God with the express intention of listening for the voice of God. This is neither ordinary Bible reading, nor Bible study. The text should be read slowly and aloud. It is best to take a shorter passage, a Psalm, a story or passage from the Gospels, or a paragraph from the Epistles. Read it slowly and aloud. Listen to the words as if God himself were speaking to you. Let them penetrate into your heart. Do not argue or resist. The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit (Psalm 6:17). It is helpful to begin this reading by praying the words of Samuel “speak Lord for thy servant heareth” (I Sam. 3:9).

Meditatio. Here we are to reflect, (meditate) upon what God is saying to us by the passage. How does the specific word of God of this passage relate to me; to the circumstances of my life. This meditation should relate to my love for God and my love for others as the perfection of love is the goal of God’s work in us. Since it is never perfected in this life there will always be new things to be learned, and sins to be confessed as we look into mirror of God’s word. As God speaks to us we will be taught, corrected, and encouraged.

Oratio. It is now that we pray. We pray not out of the clamor of our inner disorder but from the light of God’s Word that has shone upon our situation. As D. Bonhoeffer has written: “The Scripture meditation leads to prayer. We have already said that the most promising method of prayer is to allow oneself to be guided by the word of the Scriptures, to pray on the basis of a word of Scripture. In this way we shall not become the victims of our own emptiness. Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word, and what is more, to accept it in one’s personal situation, particular tasks, decisions, sins, and temptations.”²²

Contemplatio. This is simply remaining for a time in the presence of God once we have prayed, being silent in God’s presence allowing the Holy Spirit to continue to minister to us.

²¹ Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, p. 83

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 83-84

An easier way to remember the four steps might be:

- Read
- Reflect
- Respond
- Rest

While almost any passage of Scripture may be used since “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” and is thus profitable for “doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:16), there are certain passages that the Holy Spirit may use more easily to speak to us. To help get started the following list of passages could be used on successive days.

- Do Justice, Love Kindness (Micah 6:8)
- Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4-7)
- God’s New Thing (Isaiah 43:19-21)
- Trust in God (Psalms 62:8)
- Do Not Fear (Isaiah 43:1-4)
- God Comforts Us (2Corinthians 1:3-4)
- Jesus’ Baptism (Luke 3:21-22)
- Let Your Light Shine (Matthew 5:13-16)
- My Burden is Light (Matthew 11:28-30)
- Too Many Fish (Luke 5:4-7)
- Clothe Yourselves with Love (Colossians 3:14-16)
- Travel Light (Luke 9:1-6)
- Be Still (Psalm 46:10-11)
- Unless the Lord Builds (Psalm 127:1-2)
- A New Heart (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

We might add in closing this section that memorized Scripture is of immense value for prayer. Having the Word of God hid in our hearts allows us to mediate upon it at any moment. Remember the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to speak to us and to teach us. The closer the Word is to us, and the more it is in us, the easier it is for Him to speak to us.

Prayer a Gift of the Holy Spirit

This makes a natural transition to our last point on the discipline of prayer. All that we have said about prayer is useless and meaningless unless the Spirit of God Himself enables us to pray. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in Romans 8, one of the preeminent chapters of the Bible on the Holy Spirit. In this chapter Paul shows how the Holy Spirit accomplishes three great acts in the life of the believer:

- He delivers us from the power of sin and enables us to live righteous lives. (verses 1-14)
- He gives us the assurance that we are God’s children. (verses 15-17)
- He enables us to endure our present sufferings with joy. (verses 18-39)

It is in the context of the third section that Paul speaks of the role of the Holy Spirit in Prayer when he says:

“Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what *is* the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to *the will of God.*” (Romans 8:26).

He says that we do not know how to pray. In light of our ignorance and our inability to understand our own lives and to ask for the things that we should, the Spirit does two things. As Paul says here he literally takes over and intercedes for us, prays in our place. The second thing is that he enlightens us as we pray. A part of His promised work is to lead us into “all truth” (John 16:12-15). This enlightenment often comes as we are praying. It comes at the intersection of Scripture and life. As we come to God asking to be enlightened by his Word, bringing our cares, concerns, and lack of understanding to Him the Holy Spirit enlightens us and speaks to us in our spirit assuring us that God is with us in our present suffering and giving us light as to how we should act.

This was why Martin Luther in his writing "A Simple Way to Pray" written in 1535, identifies the necessity of listening to the Holy Spirit who still speaks to His own when he says, " If such an abundance of good thoughts comes to us (when praying) we ought to disregard the other petitions, make room for such thoughts, listen in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit himself preaches here, and one word of his sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation... if in the midst of such thoughts the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart with rich, enlightening thoughts, honor him by letting go of this written scheme; be still and listen to him who can do better than you can. Remember what he says and note it well and you will behold wondrous things in the law of God,..." ²³

We close this section with a long quote from a book that we have already referred to, *Prayer* by O. Hallesby. The last chapter of the book is entitled “The Spirit of Prayer”. In this chapter, after entreating us to simply ask for the Spirit of prayer whatever our difficulty in praying might be, he then says the following about the blessings that the Holy Spirit will bring to us:

“Such childlike petitions for the Spirit of prayer will little by little bring about a change in our prayer life which we hardly thought possible.”

²³ Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, 1535

“Without noticing it ourselves, prayer will become the great centralizing and unifying factor in our distracted and busy lives. In everything that we experience during the day, our minds and our hearts will quietly and naturally be drawn to God. A longing to talk to God about everything will arise. Everything we see and hear in connection with our dear ones, our friends, our enemies, the converted or the unconverted, temporal or spiritual affairs, small things and great, the hard and the easy, all the observations and experiences which fill and shape our daily lives, will naturally and readily begin to take the form of prayer. Intimate friends tell each other of their experiences as soon as possible. So it is in prayer too. The Spirit of prayer makes us so intimate with God that we scarcely pass through an experience before we speak to Him about it, either in supplication, in sighing, in pouring out our woes before Him, in fervent requests, or in thanksgiving and adoration.”²⁴

²⁴ O. Hallesby, *Prayer*, pp. 184,185