

Simple Prayer

Pray as you can, not as you can't – Dom John Chapman

We today yearn for prayer and hide from prayer. We are attracted to it and repelled by it. We believe prayer is something we should do, even something we want to do, but it seems like a chasm stands between us and actually praying. We experience the agony of prayerlessness.

We are not quite sure what holds us back. Of course we are busy with work and family obligations, but that is only a smoke screen. Our busyness seldom keeps us from eating or sleeping or making love. No, there is something deeper, more profound keeping us in check. In reality, there are any number of "somethings" preventing us, all of which we need to explore. But for now there is one "something" that needs immediate attention. It is the notion – almost universal among us modern high achievers – that we have to have everything "just right: in order to pray. That is, before we can really pray, our lives need some fine tuning, or we need to know more about how to pray, or we need to study the philosophical questions surrounding prayer, or we need to have a better grasp of the great traditions of prayer. And on it goes.

It isn't that these are wrong concerns or that there is never a time to deal with them. But we are starting from the wrong end of things – putting the cart before the horse. Our problem is that we assume prayer is something to master the way we master algebra or auto mechanics. That puts us in the "on-top" position, where we are competent and in control. But when praying, we come "underneath," where we calmly and deliberately surrender control and become incompetent. "To pray", writes Emilie Griffin, "means to be willing to be naive."

I used to think that I needed to get all my motives straightened out before I could pray, really pray. I would be in some prayer group, for example, and I would examine what I had just prayed and think to myself, "How utterly foolish and self-centered; I can't pray this way!" And so I would determine never to pray again until my motives were pure. You understand, I did not want to be a hypocrite. I knew that God is holy and righteous. I knew that prayer is no magic incantation. I knew that I must not use God for my own ends. But the practical effect of all this internal soul-searching was to completely paralyze my ability to pray.

The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives – altruistic and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it.

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