

## The Discipline of Prayer

One of the most important of all the spiritual disciplines is **prayer**. We often think of prayer as an act of worship—something we offer to God to affirm his greatness and our dependence upon him. And while this is a good thought about prayer, I'm not sure it goes far enough.

*Prayer is more than worship.*

I once heard prayer described very simply as conversation with God about what we and he are doing together. I like that. After all, there is nothing in this life that we do without God; “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). We talk to God and we listen to God principally not because we fear him or respect him, but because we love him. We want to spend time with him. We want to talk with him about things that are important in our lives and the lives of others. And we want to know what is important to him. We listen for his voice.

Now, it's an amazing thing to be able to talk to the Creator and Sustainer of everything, the King of glory, the Ruler of the universe. If we wished to have an audience with the king or queen of a nation, we probably would not be able to gain it. If it were possible to gain the opportunity to speak with an earthly ruler, it might be a once-in-a-lifetime chance. But God, the Ruler of all, makes himself available to us all the time. Any time. Day or night, in good times and bad, we can meet with God and talk with him about everything. "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

*How do we pray?*

There are a number of answers to that question, many of them very good. For instance, many Christians like to pray according to the acronym ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Each of those facets of prayer is important, and the ACTS acronym is very helpful to some believers. Some Christians particularly benefit from using a prayer book (e.g. ***The Book of Common Prayer***). Some folks use the ancient prayer book of God's people, Psalms. I myself have found it beneficial to "pray the psalms"—that is, read the words of a psalm as a prayer—especially in times of stress. Some churches have special prayer ministries wherein folks who are particularly gifted in intercessory prayer will pray for people. Some groups meet especially for prayer for their churches, their schools, or their communities. Many Christians through the centuries have benefited from using "breath prayers" (prayers that can be uttered in a single breath), such as "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

As I see it, the form of prayer is not nearly so important as the attitude of prayer. The humble heart, eager to spend time with the Lord, is free to approach God. "God is welcoming us home— home to peace and serenity and joy," writes Richard J. Foster. "We need not be afraid. God's arms are stretched out to take us in. God's heart is large enough to receive us."<sup>13</sup>

Jesus's friends and followers asked him to teach them to pray. His instruction to them was to pray not for show or for other people to see. He gave his disciples a model prayer, and for 2000 years followers of Jesus have prayed these words of Jesus found in Matthew 6:

*Our Father, which art in heaven*

*Hallowed be thy name.*

*Thy Kingdom come,*

*Thy will be done*

*On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our trespasses  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.  
Amen.*

The teaching of Jesus on prayer is a reflection of the life that Jesus offers to us. The familiar words "Our Father which art in heaven" do not mean "distant, fearsome deity who is far away in space and time." Instead, they mean "loving Father who is right here with us, always near us." Just let that sink in for a moment! Because of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is available. Just as Jesus talked to God when he lived here on earth, we can talk to God. Although some people see the recitation of this model prayer (called "The Lord's Prayer" or the "Our Father") as a dry, lifeless exercise, this certainly doesn't have to be the case. The simple act of praying this prayer as a beginning to each day can have life changing results.

And that's the real aim: life change. As with all the spiritual disciplines, prayer brings us into communion with God, who changes our hearts.

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