

Spiritual Exercises 2: Praying

In essence, prayer is about us coming towards God. We can come to Him with any type of communication, at any time. Picture the sort of family where the father isn't just there to pay the bills and drive people to places. This father is involved with all aspects of his children's lives: he goes on walks with any family member who wants to take him, he can find things when they go missing (yet again!) just before church, and his children know who to come to if they need advice. When they're hurt or upset, they can come to him. They can even shout at him without him turning a deaf ear. He is someone with whom they all want to share their day, the good parts as well as the bad ones.

That's how God wants to be with us.

Paradoxically, this kind of informality requires discipline. If the god of this age (Satan) has failed to keep us out of God's kingdom, his back-up strategy is to eat away at the times we communicate with God to keep us, His sons and daughters, distant from Him. It doesn't matter whether it is tiredness, lack of organisation, busy-ness or disillusionment, just so long as we are failing to cultivate and maintain the habit of talking things over with God.

In parallel with that, there we may be discouraged when we *do* pray because God doesn't seem to be answering. L.A.T. Van Dooren in his book *Prayer – the Christian's vital breath* uses the illustration of a small boat being moored to a jetty. As you pull on the rope, what happens – does the jetty move to become nearer the boat, or is it the boat that moves? Prayer, he says, is intended not that we should make Him bend "His will to fit in with what we desire and want, but rather [] to bring us into closer fellowship with God and thus more and more into line with His will and purposes."

We may be asking for the wrong thing, so it may be that we need to modify our request. It may be that God is using the delay to build up our faith. Jesus encourages us to pray and not give up through the parable of the persistent friend (Luke 11) and the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18). We persist in prayer, Jesus says, because of God's character as the good father (chapter 11) and the just judge (chapter 18).

It may be that we have simply got into a rut about how and when we pray.

The good news is that we have a life-time in which to learn how to pray. Even better, there are scores of books on the subject, and scores of Christians who have read them and tried them out.

My personal recommendations for introductory books are ***Celebration of Discipline*** and ***Prayer*** by Richard Foster. A slightly more specific book is ***Intercessory Prayer*** by Dutch Sheets (subtitled *How God Can Use Your Prayers to Move Heaven and Earth* – I really like the idea that my prayers can have impact!).

The following are suggestions for prayer practice that I have found helpful at one time or another.

The Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6 and Luke 11

This prayer starts with the recognition of who God is (both Our Father, and Holy), then moves to prayer for daily needs, for our relationships and for deliverance from testing, all in the context of God's eternal kingdom. You could try using it as a starting point, interweaving your own words of praise, your own requests for daily needs and so on.

ACTS

Use this mnemonic to structure your prayer:

Adoration – praise and worship for who God is, His character

Confession – agreeing with God about the wrongness of certain thoughts, deeds or words

Thanksgiving – for His kindness towards you

Supplication – prayer for the needs of others and yourself

Praying through scripture

Choose a passage which describes an individual's encounter with God eg Abraham pleading for Sodom (Genesis 18), Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3), Hannah pleading for a son (1 Samuel 1), the believers after Peter and John's arrest (latter part of Acts 4). Notice how they pray.

Do you see praise and worship, thanksgiving, petition (bringing the needs of others or themselves to God), intercessory prayer (praying that God's declared will, revealed in scripture, becomes a reality in a specific situation) or confession? Work out how you can make their prayer your own.

Contemplative prayer

Choose a time and place where you can be quiet. Choose a natural item eg a shell, flower or fruit. Take time to appreciate this part of creation with all your senses. For example, you could feel the weight of an orange in your hand; touch the peel to feel its texture; rotate it in the light; smell it; cut it open and hear the sound made as the peel comes away; taste the peel, the pith and the flesh. Finish by offering your praise to God for this small part of all He has made.

Books of prayers

Sometimes, we can't make up prayers by ourselves. At this sort of time, it is useful to rely on prayers that other people have written. You can find collections of prayers in Christian bookshops or use Wikipedia to find eg the prayer of St Francis, the prayer of St Richard.

Recording prayers, and the answers

A list of the prayers you have prayed and the date and way in which God answered them is a great encouragement in difficult times.

Praying for friends

Sometimes I see something that reminds me of a friend, or their name comes into my head "for no reason". I have got used to using these as prompts from God to pray for them.

We intend to have a service centred on prayer in May. Please contact me with your contributions for that service or for the next spiritual exercise (Biblical Meditation) nicola.tzfeather@gmail.com