

# Prayer – Connecting With God

## A Place to Begin



Prayer is the most essential thing we do as Christians. If you think in terms of trying to get God's attention to serve your purposes you'll only turn to God in prayer when you need something. But if you understand it is God's nature to seek us out and to draw us into participation with what he is doing then it becomes a way of communing with God and paying attention to Him. Then prayer becomes a way to hear God's voice in order to cooperate with his Holy Spirit in what he's doing; to listen and live a life of obedience and respond in ways that allows God to bring about his purposes.

Prayer is not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts. It is, rather, a stance, a way of being present. Prayer is so much less about technique and simply about all the ways and moments we commune with God. Rather than it being about a set time and place...or even words, it's more about living into a deeper awareness of God's activity in our lives and the habit of turning our heart toward God throughout our day.

The problem often with prayer is that we talk about prayer...and don't pray. Sometimes, instead of praying, we can find ourselves thinking about praying; evaluating how we are praying, figuring out what is proper or most effective. While these mental gymnastics may be well intentioned, and in fact have some real value as reflections before or after prayer, their effect during prayer is to keep us from really praying. They keep us in the mind and out of the heart.

The task is getting prayer from our heads to our hearts. Prayer can become an empty habit or a mindless exercise. There are times when you might realize that your praying is an almost autopilot activity. You are speaking words, but you are not always sure they are expressing your heart to God.

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"The habit of a life of regular private prayer is built not in talking about prayer, nor reading pamphlets and books about it, nor hearing lectures about it, but by appearing day after day at the appointed place, at the appointed time, and staying put as we pour out our hearts and as we hold them cupped and open for His direction." (Steere, Douglas. *Work & Contemplation*. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, p. 135).

What's the purpose of prayer? Like all the practices of the Christian faith...it's to deepen our relationship with God; to connect with God more deeply.

If life is received and not achieved...it's not so much about what he say as it is what we hear. It's not about us getting God's attention. Prayer, whatever shape it takes, is becoming a simple directing of our attention always to God. Perhaps our real task in

prayer “is to attune ourselves to the conversation already going on deep in our hearts.” Perhaps prayer is less about what we say and more about what we hear.

For Jesus, prayer was always more than a form of words expressing praise, sorrow, needs, or desires. It was more, even, than an attitude of the heart oriented towards God. Prayer, at its core, was recognition that God was constantly present at every moment, and therefore a constant attentiveness and openness to his Divine Presence. The prayer of Jesus involved talking to God, and more deeply it meant a turning towards God. But deepest of all, it meant dwelling in God.

Prayer has always been one of those difficult things. It is suggested that our struggles in prayer are more typical than we think. However, few of us like to talk about our disappointing experiences. We’re embarrassed that we don’t enjoy praying and don’t do it more. We wish prayer were a “want to,” but it’s a “supposed to.” Part of the problem is that we don’t really know how to beyond praying for things or what kinds of prayers we should use.

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As well, there is a lot of expectation surrounding prayer. We intuitively know that the best prayer is seldom a hit-and-miss matter, yet we find ourselves struggling to make it a consistent pattern in our lives with so many external and internal forces that keep us from it.

Emilie Griffin, in *Clinging-The Experience of Prayer* writes, “Prayer is a matter of keeping at it. The rewards will come no other way. Thunderclaps and lightning flashes are very unlikely. It is well to start small and quietly. No need to plan heroic fasts or all-night vigils. You should have it firm in your mind that prayer is neither to impress other people nor to impress God. It’s not to be taken with a mentality of success. The goal in prayer is to give oneself away.”

But the tensions in prayer are real. They trip us up, they impede us and hold us back. We labor under expectations that we don’t know how to move through. Do you really have to name every prayer request? Do you have to feel something? If you don’t hear anything what does that mean...? Do you need to know what to say? Are you doing it wrong because you don’t see any fruit? Can you pray wrong...?

These worries, and inner dialogues we have keep us at the surface of ourselves. They hinder us from moving into the richness of God’s presence that is readily available to us. They also keep us from moving deeper into our own selves; the part of ourselves that is vast, deep and strong.

What we soon discover is that prayer comes in many forms - there are those like prayers of gratitude and adoration, listening prayer, silent prayer, the Jesus Prayer, fixed hour prayer, liturgical prayer, speaking in tongues and practicing the presence of God that move us upward closer to God. There are others like the Prayer of Examen,

Prayer of Confession and Prayer of Lament that draw us inward to search out the hidden and broken places of our lives. Lastly there are those that draw us outward into the global community encouraging us to action like prayers of Intercession and Healing.

Upward, inward and outward - all these types of prayers are necessary for a well balanced prayer life.