

Praying When We Don't Feel Like It

By Richard Rolheiser



Most of us find it difficult to pray. We want to pray, make resolutions to pray, but never quite get around to actually praying. Why?

It's not so much that we are insincere, ill-motivated, or lazy, it's just that invariably we are too tired, too distracted, too restless, too emotionally preoccupied, too angry, too busy, or feel ourselves too distant from God to feel that we can actually pray. We have too many headaches and too many heartaches. And so we come home after a long day and simply can't work up the energy to pray and instead call a friend, watch television, rest, putter round the house,

or do anything to soothe our tiredness and wind down from the pressures of life, except pray.

How can we pray when both our bodies and our hearts are chronically stressed and on over-load?

By understanding what prayer really is. Prayer, as one of its oldest definitions puts it, is lifting mind and heart to God. That sounds simple but it is hard to do. Why?

Because we have the wrong notion of what that means. We unconsciously nurse the idea that we can only pray when we are not distracted, not bored, not angry, not emotionally and sexually preoccupied, and not caught up in our many heartaches and headaches so that we can give proper attention to God in a reverent and loving way. God then is like a parent who only wants to see us on our best behavior and we only go into his presence when we have nothing to hide, are joy-filled, and can give him praise and honor. Because we don't understand what prayer is, we treat God as an authority figure or a visiting dignitary, namely, as someone to whom we don't tell the real truth. We don't tell him what is really going on in our lives but what should, ideally, be going on in them. We tell God what we think he wants to hear.

Because we don't understand what prayer is, we treat God as an authority figure or a visiting dignitary, namely, as someone to whom we don't tell the real truth.

Because of this we find it difficult to pray with any regularity. What happens is this: We go to pray, privately or in church, and we enter into that feeling tired, bored, preoccupied, perhaps even angry at someone. We come to prayer carrying heartaches and headaches of all kinds and we try to bracket what we are actually feeling and instead crank up praise, reverence, and gratitude to God. Of course it doesn't work! Our hearts and heads (because they are preoccupied with something else, our real issues) grow distracted and we get the sense that what we are doing - trying to pray - is not something we can do right now and we leave it for some other time.

But the problem is not that our prayer is unreal or that the moment isn't right. The problem is that we are not lifting mind and heart to God. We are trying to lift thoughts and feelings to God which are not our own. We aren't praying out of our own hearts and

own heads.

If we take seriously that prayer is lifting mind and heart to God then every feeling and every thought we have is a valid and apt entry into prayer, no matter how irreverent, unholy, selfish, sexual, or angry that thought or feeling might seem. Simply put, if you go to pray and you are feeling bored, pray boredom; if you are feeling angry, pray anger; if you are sexually preoccupied, pray that preoccupation; if you are feeling murderous, pray murder; and if you are feeling full of fervor and want to praise and thank God, pray fervor. Every thought or feeling is a valid entry into prayer. What's important is that we pray what's inside of us and not what we think God would like to see inside of us.

Every thought or feeling is a valid entry into prayer. What's important is that we pray what's inside of us and not what we think God would like to see inside of us.

That's why the Psalms are so apt for prayer and why the Church has chosen them as the basis for so much of its liturgical prayer. They run the whole gamut of feeling, from praising God with our every breath to wishing to bash our enemies' heads against a stone. From praise to murder - with everything in between! That is indeed the range of our thoughts and feelings. The Psalms are a keyboard upon which we can play every song of our lives - and our songs aren't always all happy or pious. The Psalms give us an apt language to help us raise mind and heart to God.

What's so unfortunate is that, most often, because we misunderstand prayer, we stay away from it just when we most need it. We only try to pray when we feel good, centered, reverent, and worthy of praying. But we don't try to pray precisely when we most need it, that is, when we are feeling bad, irreverent, sinful, emotionally and sexually preoccupied, and unworthy of praying. But all of these feelings can be our entry into prayer. No matter the headache or the heartache, we only need to lift it up to God.