

A PRACTICE OF PRAYER

by

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Introduction to Prayer and Spiritual Discipline

Each of us regularly participates in disciplines that benefit our lives. For example, we save money to put a down payment on a house, or we exercise and eat right to keep our physical bodies healthy. Without setting aside regular time dedicated to the practice of these disciplines, we would not be able to achieve our goals. Likewise, regular participation in spiritual disciplines is the way we work toward spiritual goals in our lives.

Richard Foster tells us that, of all the spiritual disciplines (he covers twelve in his book *Celebration of Discipline*), prayer is the most central because, through it, we can enter “. . . perpetual communion with the Father . . . the deepest and highest work of the human spirit.”¹ So, if prayer is of utmost importance in our spiritual lives, why do many of us, even some of the most faithful and religious individuals, struggle with implementing prayer as a regular discipline in our daily lives?² What are the most important elements of prayer and what does a healthy prayer practice look like?

This essay will try to answer these questions by exploring what Jesus teaches about prayer in the Gospels. It will engage with scripture and trusted writings on prayer and the practice of spiritual disciplines. It will also lean into an honest and personal experience of what it looks like to begin to live out a life centred around the spiritual discipline of prayer.³

Prayer can feel intimidating, if only because of the sheer quantity of information written on the topic. Through this essay, I hope to help the reader gain a foundational understanding of

¹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 33.

² Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 68.

³ Some of the most trusted authors on Christian spirituality and prayer that are included in this paper are: Richard Foster, C. S. Lewis, Henri Nouwen and Dallas Willard

how a healthy and disciplined prayer life can help us further understand God's character and lead us toward deeper discipleship with Jesus.

Why Do We Find It Difficult to Pray?

In his 1963 book on prayer, *Letters to Malcolm*, C. S. Lewis acknowledges that finding *quality time* to pray in our busy lives is difficult.⁴ How much more do we struggle with the busyness of our schedules in 2024? With the cost of living skyrocketing across Canada, more people than ever are working far above the standard 40-hour work week,⁵ leaving increasingly less time for activities like recreation, rest, and prayer.

Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread (Matt 6:11), so it feels ironic that the time we need to pray for exactly that is taken up by the busyness required to pay our grocery bills. We long for our Shepherd to make us lie down in green pastures and lead us beside still waters (Ps 23:2-3), but we then regularly decline God's invitation to do just that. Our actions show that we trust more in our own ability to provide our daily bread than in God's.

We must then ask, is it difficult to pray because we do not have time, or is it more honest to say that we find it difficult to give God our limited time because we do not trust that God will answer our prayers and provide us with what we need, or—more likely—want? When time is limited, we make choices based on the most effective use of that time. We trust what we can do ourselves, and we place God in the position of the “when-all-else-fails” backup plan.

⁴ *Quality time* – For Lewis, quality time for prayer requires physical and mental alertness and the ability to focus without falling asleep. Lewis believes that “The body ought to pray as well as the soul”; Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 20–21.

⁵ Antle, “You Can Hear Your Body.”

We continually expose our lack of the discipline and strength required to be Jesus' disciples. Instead of finding rest and instruction in the presence of our Saviour, we label Jesus' teachings as mere ideals unattainable by humans.⁶ We find our identity in our overcommitted schedules and the control we wield over our lives instead of in Jesus' promises.

This control can also carry over into our prayers when we eventually find time to pray. We believe if we use fancy words, pray with the right people, and use the proper prayer technique, God will surely hear our prayers and take them more seriously. Our control tries to master prayer in the same way we master our jobs or our education.⁷ But God invites us into Their presence as we are, even if we feel unworthy to be there.⁸

All this is not to say that we need not work to fulfill our responsibilities, trusting that if we do *nothing*, God will provide for our needs. No, Paul reminds us that we are “God’s coworkers” (1 Cor 3:9). Our jobs and responsibilities are gifts from God, offering provision and community through regular employment. Regular prayer is an opportunity for us to acknowledge our dependence on God, give thanks for Their generosity and nurture a loving relationship.

Our lives are busy, but even in our hectic lives, we find time for the things that matter the most to us. Even those of us with impossible schedules still find time for the necessities of life, such as eating or sleeping,⁹ yet we still struggle to find time for prayer. Is this because we do not view prayer as essential to life, or, more likely, have we misunderstood what prayer is? Let us

⁶ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 2.

⁷ Foster, *Prayer*, 8.

⁸ Because I do not view God or the Holy Spirit as sexually gendered, I use They/Them (capitalized) pronouns when speaking of Them.

⁹ Foster, *Prayer*, 7.

look at what many of us have been taught about prayer so we can better grow to understand the discipline of prayer as a beautiful opportunity for which we will gladly sacrifice our time instead of viewing it as a chore that needs to be put at the bottom of our “to-do” list.

The Intentionality of Continuous Prayer

Like many other children, I was taught simple prayers that were quick and easily remembered. At dinnertime, my father either recited the Lord’s prayer so quickly and quietly that no one could have possibly understood what he was saying, or I was told to say the familiar children’s prayer, “God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for this food, Amen.” My bedtime routine included the always terrifying 18th-century children’s prayer: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord, my soul to keep. If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.”

What I and many other children were taught through these short, glib poems were habits, not prayers. Unfortunately, I was never taught *why* I should pray before meals or bed, the meaning of the words, or why saying the words out loud was intended to be a starting point to prayer, not an end goal. I was never taught about the intentionality of prayer and why this can be viewed as prayer’s most important element. As I grew, I was never encouraged to change the words to reflect my thoughts or beliefs more intentionally. Because of this, I never recognized prayer as the intimate, relational connection with God that it is.

Thomas à Kempis is recorded as saying, “Do everything with attention and not habitually.”¹⁰ As a child, I could not have possibly understood that I said my prayers purely out

¹⁰ Smoley, *Inner Christianity*, 157.

of habit. However, hindsight has shown me that in this habitual prayer practice, I learned that prayers were merely a hurdle. If I wanted to eat, I said my prayer so my parents would allow me to eat. If I wanted to sleep, I said my prayers so I could go to sleep. For those who were raised practicing prayer like this, it is no wonder many of us grew up believing prayers were just a gateway to getting what we wanted. We became disenfranchised with the idea of prayer when, in adulthood, our prayers no longer seemed to “work.”

Jesus teaches that our prayers are not for anyone else to see or reward us for (Matt 6:5-8). Prayers are not a way to gain glory or recognition but are a way to engage with our loving heavenly Father who desires nothing more than to give us good things (Matt 7:11). We are not to pray thoughtlessly, believing that through habitual methods and repetitive words, God will be more inclined to hear us (Matt 6:7-8). Prayer is not transactional. Prayer is relational, honest, and humble.

A spiritual discipline of intentional prayer does not see us pray only out of habit, guilt, or reward. Intentionality in prayer continually and consciously directs our thoughts and hearts toward the practice of prayer in every activity and at all times of the day—not because we are “required” to, but because we long to be connected to our Creator in the same way we long to take our next breath. Dallas Willard speaks beautifully about the idea of praying continuously by saying: “God will meet us in love, and love will keep our minds directed toward him as the magnet pulls the needle of the compass . . . Constant prayer will only ‘burden’ us as wings burden the bird in flight.”¹¹

¹¹ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 186.

Prayer as Relationship

A widely known analogy of God being viewed as a “genie” through prayer exists. This view believes that if I say the right words and have enough faith, God will give me whatever I ask. Mistranslations of scripture, like “Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11:22-25), uphold this kind of backward theology. However, when we read these verses in context, we can learn important lessons about our prayers.

This passage from Mark teaches us that our prayers need to be grounded in faith (Mark 11:22). In that faith, we bring God all of our difficulties (mountains), trusting that God can and will deal with them appropriately and in alignment with Their will—even if that is not how we would want God to deal with them.¹² Next, this passage teaches us that we need prayers of expectation, where we not only place confidence in God’s faithfulness to answer our prayer but also acknowledge God’s answer when it comes because “Maybe our trouble is that what we want from God is *our* answer, and we do not recognize *his* answer when it comes.”¹³ Finally, we need to have prayers of charity (Mark 11:25) because a heart that is filled with bitterness is a heart separate from God.¹⁴

These few verses, which have so often been mistranslated and led to a misunderstanding of prayer, when read in context, reveal the beautiful relationship we can have with God through prayer. In this passage, we learn that God is faithful, safe, and forgiving, and because of those characteristics, we can come to God confidently and submissively in prayer.

¹² Barclay, *Gospel of Mark*, 276.

¹³ Barclay, *Gospel of Mark*, 277.

¹⁴ Barclay, *Gospel of Mark*, 278.

I have had relationships where my “friends” came to me *only* when they needed something. Or, under the guise of openness, they present their concern, asking for my help, but when my advice does not align with what they *want* me to say, suddenly, I am labelled as the “bad guy.” I believe this is the relationship some people want with God—one that appears to be close but, on inspection, is intensely conditional. We want God on *our* conditions and have a difficult time surrendering control. Again, this stems from a lack of trust.

Instead, we need to view God as a perfect Father (parent) who knows what we need and when we desire something unhealthy for us. We can come to God with open hands and outstretched arms and lay all our concerns at Their feet.

We cannot build a prayer discipline based on a God we do not trust. However, when we can live fully exposed and vulnerable lives in the continuous presence and control of the One who created us, the freedom that comes with that relationship is almost indescribable. Our prayers suddenly stop being about how much we can demand of God, and they become about listening and seeking God’s wisdom for our lives. Our prayers eventually stop being entirely about ourselves and become more about petitioning and interceding for others. If we read the scriptures and enter a trusting prayer relationship with God, we will desire to spend more time in the safety and presence of our Lord and Father.

Jesus as Our Model

In addition to his teachings, Jesus models a life of prayer for us through his actions recorded during his ministry. These examples of prayer can help us gain insights into how we should practice prayer in our own lives.

Jesus often spent time alone in prayer. In one such incident (Mark 1: 29–34), we read of Jesus' long day of teaching and healing in Capernaum. The next morning (1:35), Jesus gets up very early to go off and pray alone. When the disciples eventually find him, instead of continuing the good work where they are, Jesus tells them that they should move on (1:38). Had Jesus received guidance from God in his prayers?¹⁵ Perhaps. However, what is more important to understand from Jesus is the personal and relational nature of prayer. Prayer is intimate. God wants to meet us in our vulnerability, our pain, and our shame. Jesus experienced shame on the cross and understands the weight it puts on us. Without time alone, we cannot enter a truly vulnerable relationship with our heavenly Father, yet *this* is what God invites us into.

We see examples of Jesus's vulnerability in passages like Luke 22:39-46, where his friends not only cannot stay awake for him in his time of need but where he begs God to deliver him from this death. Jesus, again, has separated himself from others, and although the ultimate answer to his prayer was *no*, an angel is sent to strengthen him, representing God's willingness to meet those who come to Them in prayer during their times of distress.¹⁶ Through Jesus'

¹⁵ Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer*, 15.

¹⁶ Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer*, 16.

experience in Gethsemane, we too can take heart, knowing that we are not alone in our distress and that God meets us exactly where we are.

Finally, Jesus prays from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Even in his most agonizing moments, Jesus’ compassion for humanity exudes from him. He intercedes even for those who are involved with his crucifixion, those who have not asked for forgiveness. We can find hope in this action—hope that in moments when we cannot find the words, or if we are so lost that we cannot understand the sinfulness of our actions, our Saviour chooses to intercede on our behalf, loving us and interceding for us when we are unable to ask him to do so. Then we too, should be willing to forgive and be compassionate to those who do wrong by us. We should ask God to forgive them, even when they have not yet asked us for forgiveness. Jesus’ compassion knows no bounds. We have his actions as our example, so we, too, must be willing to set the prayer life of Jesus as our ultimate goal, even if, due to our humanity, we can never achieve it.

Conclusion

Christian discipleship in prayer is a fundamental discipline for a life that seeks to live as Jesus did. Prayer is a complex discipline to live out well, and because of fear and uncertainty, many people choose to refrain from fully engaging in prayer. However, when we can understand the love our heavenly Father has for us as children and the compassion Jesus has for us in our suffering, we can begin to recognize the comfort and peace that comes from living a life nestled in continuous prayer and relationship with our God.

Our congregations need to understand not only the meaning of prayer but also its methods. Practices like meditation, silence, and solitude work well alongside the discipline of prayer, not in competition with it. With prayer and other spiritual disciplines, we can find purpose by entering as co-labourers with God, working towards accomplishing Their Kingdom's purposes.¹⁷

God has compassion for us when our world is falling apart and invites us to meet Them in our struggles. To connect with God in prayer, however, we cannot merely “speak” to God from our heads. We need to cry out to God from our hearts. As Nouwen teaches: “Prayer is standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart: that is, at the point of our being where there are no divisions or distinctions and where we are totally one. There God’s Spirit dwells and there the great encounter takes place. There the heart speaks to heart, because there we stand before the face of the lord, all-seeing, within us.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 184.

¹⁸ Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*, XVI.

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