

Some Steps to Spiritual Renewal

Part 7

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PRAYER – INTRODUCTION

There are several points that need to be made by way of introduction to this vast and most important practice – a practice which is central to Christian discipleship. In this first part, we need to understand how it is that the practice of prayer – especially personal prayer – is contrary in every way to the way the world thinks. I would want to go further and claim that Christian discipleship in general and the practice of personal prayer in particular are counter cultural, especially in our functional and materialistic western world.

Surely we would do better, many would claim, to spend our time in good works more after the style of Martha rather than to waste time, sitting at the feet of Jesus like Mary. (Yet you remember that Jesus claims that Mary had ‘chosen the better part.’) Surely, or so the world would claim, you can spend your time better, ‘producing something that will benefit others.’ (So much of our thinking is of course, product orientated – and preferably a product which is worth something. Only the finished product, it would seem to our Western way of thinking, can justify any time spent on the process. Keep the latter to a minimum.)

Then there is the equally counter-cultural nature about the practice of personal prayer when we realize that in contemporary terms we shall never be much good at it. This realization is especially difficult to appropriate because throughout most of our lives we were encouraged to drop those things we were not much good at and to concentrate on those things we could perhaps eventually ‘specialize in.’ Well, you’d better know from the outset that you will never be able to specialize in or become a specialist in prayer. Rather, contrary to the way you have lived your life to date, you must still persevere with something even in the knowledge that you will never be much good at it!

So, why you might be asking, am I so daunting and even discouraging about this? There are two main reasons. The first is that there is a real danger in speaking about techniques when it comes to prayer and praying. With the contemporary cult of meditation and meditation techniques there is a prevailing attitude which would suggest that prayer is something that *we do*. Nothing could be more the opposite of the truth. Attached to this misconception is the idea that prayer produces the ‘feel-good-factor’ and that it is some kind of therapy. In this way we attempt to justify time spent in prayer or meditation,

telling ourselves that such an outcome means that the time 'is well spent.' (We've got something to show for our efforts, so to speak.)

We only begin to get all this in a proper perspective when we realize two fundamental principles about personal prayer. In the first place St. Paul is adamant: 'It is not you who prays,' insists St. Paul, 'but the Holy Spirit who prays in you and through you.' The initiative in prayer is not with us. It initiates in the heart of God Himself and is part and parcel of the love between the Father and the Son within the heart of God Himself where Christ 'ever lives and makes intercession for us.'

And notice here that I deliberately interchange the words 'prayer' and 'love.' St. Theresa of Avila you see, got it right when she said: 'Prayer is not a matter of thinking much, but rather of loving much.' And of course there are two further difficulties inside that amazing realization. Love of course needs no justification, it is its own justification, and unlocks us from the contemporary utilitarian bind – 'is it worth the time we spend on it?'

Then of course we can begin to see how love is not primarily and certainly not exclusively a mental process, locked into the mind. Rather it is primarily a matter of the heart and the will, employing every part of ourselves in the words of the first commandment, exhorting us to love God with 'all our heart and mind and passions.' To use the much overused modern jargon: prayer is holistic, so that Bishop Theophan wrote: 'When you pray, stand before God with your head in your heart' or as St. Paul says: 'I will pray with the mind, but I will pray with the heart also.'

In our next session we will be unpacking some of these basic principles and begin to see how they could make such a difference in our own personal prayer life, in which we do not attempt so much to 'pull God down' into our concerns and agendas – those 'shopping lists', we so often present in prayer – but rather in what ways we can be 'lifted up' by the Holy Spirit to become part of the continual worship and life, agendas and concerns of heaven. Such a new way of seeing prayer and indeed of other aspects of our lives, is as revolutionary and subversive as those scientific discoveries of old, when Copernicus and others reversed the way we saw our world and ourselves – no longer at the centre with the sun revolving around us, but rather, totally the other way about. Prayer re-centres us in God and not the other way about.