

Prayer as A Spiritual Discipline

thoughts, reflections and ideas from "The Life You've Always Wanted" by John Ortberg (chapter 6)

Spiritual Discipline: Any activity that can help me gain power to live as Jesus taught and modeled it.

Prayer is perhaps the one spiritual discipline that most people feel guilty about. We think that if we really love God prayer should flow out of us without effort or discipline. That's not the case, not even the case for Jesus' first followers. The reality is, prayer doesn't come naturally and it doesn't happen automatically. *Prayer is learned behavior.* Nobody is born an expert at it. No one ever masters it. Thomas Merton, in *Contemplative Prayer*, says, "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life!"

So how do I begin? . . .

- **When and where should I pray?** Try to choose the same time each day to have a focused time of prayer. What time of day is best? Well, when are you at your best? Give God your best time. Also, pay attention to the setting where you're going to pray. Find a place where you will be free of distractions. Jesus had a **time** and a **place** (see Mark 1:35)
- **How long should I pray?** Linette Martin, writes, "The way to begin is slowly. I advise 5 minutes a day. This may feel impossibly short, but it is better to get a short time established than to begin with a longer one that you give up later as being impractical . . . Set aside the same small block of time day after day. It can be done." When you are tempted to quit, don't play games with the pattern. Don't say, "I'll skip today and do ten minutes tomorrow." And, if you do miss a day, don't waste time feeling guilty about it. Go back to five minutes the next day. As habits are formed, then let desire for more increase the time.
- **Preparing to pray.** Henri Nouwen once said that when you go to pray, thoughts jump around in our minds like "monkeys jumping around on banana trees." So, at the beginning of prayer it is important to take a few minutes to "allow the monkeys to settle down." Maybe do this by taking a few deep breaths and allowing your mind to slow down. Perhaps focus your attention on a physical object, like a flower or a lit candle. You may simply want to whisper "Heavenly Father" a few times until your mind is ready to go deeper.

Some thoughts on **what** to pray . . .

- **Simple prayers.** Most people experience a gap between what they think they are supposed to pray for what they are really thinking about. Simple prayer is all about removing this gap. In simple prayer, pray about what is really on your heart (not what you wish you had on your heart). As Richard Foster says, "We bring ourselves before God just as we are, warts and all . . . We do not try to sort out the good from the bad . . . We tell God, for example, how frustrated we are with the co-worker at the office or the neighbor down the street. We ask for food, favorable weather, and good health." Dallas Willard adds, "The way to get to the meaningful prayer for those good things is to start by praying for what we are truly interested in."

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- **Be fully present.** John Ortberg says that “. . . if my mind keeps returning to a particular topic during prayer, it is probably an indication that this is the topic that is of most concern to me and I need to talk to God about.” It may be that when your mind wanders, it is wandering to what your heart most needs to speak with God about. So instead, think of these wandering thoughts as “stepping stones” to prayer, rather than as barriers. Ortberg continues, “*talking to God directly about what is happening has made prayer become a much more lively experience in my life.*”
- **Pray for others.** While simple prayer may be the type most commonly practiced in Scripture, intercession is perhaps the kind of prayer most commonly commanded in Scripture. When you intercede for others, the circle of your concern becomes expanded a little beyond yourself.
- **Prayer as relationship.** Dallas Willard describes it as, “*Prayer is talking with God about what we are doing together.*” Ortberg adds, “*In addition to all the other work that gets done through prayer, perhaps the greatest work of all is the knitting of the human heart together with the heart of God.*”

Additional prayer ideas . . .

- **Prayer as listening.** Remember, you shouldn’t do all the talking in prayer. Allow God to speak to you, through inner promptings or thoughts in your spirit, through the Bible, through nature, etc. Perhaps place an empty chair next to you or a lit candle to remind you that God is with you (in you) and that prayer is a conversation – speaking AND listening.
- **Pray the Scriptures.** Pray the scriptures back to God. The Psalms are especially suited for this. How about the “Lord’s Prayer” in Matthew 6? Practice lectio divina (see separate resource).
- **A.C.T.S. Prayer.** Use that A.C.T.S. model as a guide to prayer.
 - *Adoration* – praise, worship, adore, bless, God, etc.
 - *Confession* – name, admit, confess, agree with God about your sins
 - *Thanksgiving* – express gratitude to God, thank Him for your blessings (big and small)
 - *Supplication* – bring your requests to God
- **Make a Prayer List/Journal.** How about choosing a different area of your life to pray for each day of the week. For instance, on Monday I pray for my family, on Tuesday I pray for my work relationships, on Wednesday I pray for my neighbors, on Thursday I pray for . . .