

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: PRAYER AND STUDY

"Those who live prayerfully are constantly ready to receive the breath of God, and to let their lives be renewed and expanded."

-Henri J. M. Nouwen, "With Open Hands"

"All good meditative prayer is a conversion of our entire self to God."

-Thomas Merton, "Thoughts in Solitude"

Keep your soul free. What matters most in life is not knowledge, but character.

-A. G. Sertillanges, "The Intellectual Life"

"Many people have chosen to seek knowledge rather than to live well, and they are often let astray and their lives come to very little--or nothing at all."

-Thomas a Kempis, "The Imitation of Christ"

Sam closed his eyes as the elder began his prayer. Sam was with him for the first ten seconds, then he remembered that he needed to pick up some super-glue so he could fix that coffee cup he chipped that morning . . . which reminded him of breakfast . . . which reminded him of lunch . . . which reminded him that he also needed to get the grill's propane tank filled soon . . . which reminded him that the gas bills were finally coming down with the warmer weather . . . gee it's a beautiful day . . . kind of like those days he flew kites as a kid . . . nice breeze . . . warm sun on your face . . . Then the elder said, "Amen."

When Jamie's mother walked in her room, Jamie was laying on her back with her feet at the head of her bed. She had headphones covering her ears which blasted out music at a seemingly deafening volume. The television blared out some commercial about fast food. Jamie was holding a book up in the air two feet from her face.

"What are you doing?" her mother yelled.

"Studying."

Prayer and study are the two practices that are the most talked about, and perhaps the most commonly practiced — although not as commonly as we would like to imagine. Prayer and study are often either avoided or misapplied. However, they are two disciplines that act as catalysts for transformation in both the heart and mind.

Prayer: the Practice of the Presence of God

There is much to say about prayer, but in this section we will consider prayer as a spiritual discipline. Prayer, of course, is much more than a spiritual discipline; it is a life. As Dallas Willard comments, "It would...be a rather low-voltage spiritual life in which prayer was chiefly undertaken as a discipline...." Still, prayer is a very potent practice for opening our lives to God.

Why do we need to practice prayer as a discipline? In our culture, it is because we have severely impaired attention spans. In prayer we attend our minds to God, and all too often that attention lasts for a few seconds. We begin our prayer with "Heavenly Father," and it is not long before our minds are meandering off; attending to anything other than the One we began to address.

It is for this reason that we must undertake prayer as a spiritual discipline — to enable ourselves to attain the single-mindedness necessary to attend to the God-who-is-present. It is also vital for us to understand that prayer, just as every other discipline, is a learning process. We will find ourselves distracted. We will notice our minds wandering among the countless concerns of the day. However, as we continue in the paths of prayer, our meanders will be shorter and less frequent.

Prayer is conversation or communication with God. It involves both speaking and listening. So often we pray as if it were a monologue. But prayer is so much more than talking to God. In fact, the seasoned pray-er knows that prayer is more about listening than talking.

Soren Kierkegaard said, "A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening." And this makes sense because God knows much more than we do — and He knows it a whole lot better than we do.

Prayer is opening our lives to God for change. Prayer is recognition that God is God and we are not, and so in prayer we yield our desires to God's. Jesus prayed, "Not my will but yours."

In prayer we ask God to change the way we see other people. When you look at other people, see in their faces the eyes of Christ. It is then that transformation happens. We serve others as if we were serving Jesus. We speak to others and listen to others as if we were speaking and listening to Jesus. This happens when we take seriously Jesus words, "Whatever you do to the least . . . you do it to me."

We ask God to change the way we see ourselves. A prayer I have found to be frightening, but liberating, is "Lord, shine your Light on the dark-shadowed corners of my heart. Show me what I am hiding from you." In prayer, I invite God to come in and occupy the rooms in my heart that I have previously labeled, "Keep Out!" Then I must pay attention to the soft voice of the Spirit as he points out my "restricted areas." When I hear the Spirit pointing out my impatience, I adjust my heart in gratitude for the time and opportunity God has given me. When I see the Spirit shedding light on my pride, I remember that it is only by God's grace that I have this life.

Prayer is not complicated. Prayer is not about saying the "right words," but rather a right orientation of our entire being toward God. Prayers do not need to be flowery. Prayers like that are said either to impress others or to manipulate God. Instead, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray he told them to use simple, straightforward speech (Matthew 6:7-13, 7:7-11).

"Praying is living," Henri Nouwen says. Prayer is not something that is done only before meals or during church services. It is not limited to bowed heads, clasped hands, and closed eyes. Since praying is paying attention to God (listening, watching), we really can "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Philippians 4:6). In whatever we do, we do it with the awareness that God is present. We can simply ask Him, "God, how would you like me to act in this situation?" or "God, how should I respond to that comment?"

Our prayers may be hours spent listening in silence and solitude. They may be momentary prayers for someone in a passing car. Our prayers may be spoken as we kneel at our bed before we go to sleep. They may be silently voiced as we walk into a meeting. There are many paths of prayer, because paths of prayer are the paths of life.

To pray without ceasing means that wherever we go and in whatever we are doing, we go and do with the awareness of the always-present God. We listen for His take on the world. We look at others and ourselves through His eyes. We ask God to show us what He is doing, and how He would have us join in the process. In prayer God invites us to participate in His world and operate our lives in His ways. As we practice this discipline, we will be able to see more clearly what God's will is so that we will know how we should pray (Romans 12:1-2).

Study: Perfecting the Brains God Gave Us

Study is one of the most important keys to the change that God works in our lives. The Greek word for Repentance is "metanoeo." It means a change of thinking—a change of knowing. Metanoeo is what is in mind when Paul writes about a renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2).

Study is important because it is through study that we discover the truth found in Scripture. How will we know what God is like if we do not pay careful attention to the most significant ways He has revealed his nature and character? How will we know how God would have us live if we do not pay careful attention to the life of Christ recorded in the gospels? If we do not have right understanding of these things, we cannot know how we should live; we will find ourselves to be on very shaky ground (Matthew 7:24-27; James 1:5-8).

Study is the pursuit of truth. We seek to understand things as they truly are. How does the human body heal itself? To know that, we study physiology, biochemistry, and histology. How do I replace a sink drain? To know that, we study Bob Vila's Time-Life home repair books. What is God really like? To know that, we study Scripture. In study, we seek to understand the way things are so we can respond appropriately.

Richard Foster provides some insight into study by noting four steps involved in study:

- 1) repetition [or rehearsal]
- 2) concentration [or attention]
- 3) comprehension [or understanding]
- 4) reflection [or meditation]

Repetition is the easiest way to learn. If a person wants to learn how to swing a golf club correctly, he will first need to be shown the proper technique. However, after that, it is all about repetition. Muscles develop a memory (actually the brain develops the memory of how the muscles should be controlled), and the swing becomes "natural." So it is with the mind. That which we rehearse in our minds become patterns of thought. With enough time and rehearsal, they can become ingrained channels through which deep waters may pass unoccluded.

Here it is obvious that it matters what we rehearse in our minds. Can you think of how repetition of truths or lies may affect a person over time?

Attention is also necessary for study. There are many things that distract our minds from the attention necessary for attentive study (noise, interruptions, background music, crowds, tiredness, anxiety, etc.). We must do all we can to eliminate them, or at least minimize their effects. We must focus our thoughts on the object of our study (a book, a Bible story, a sermon, etc.). This requires perseverance. Sometimes we just have to plow through with determination to stay on task. Sometimes we will have to lay down the book (or whatever) and come back to it after some time, but we must come back to it.

Understanding is necessary for study. There comes a time (it may come quickly or after several years) when you finally "get it." It is the moment of "Eureka!" or "A ha!" when you finally get your mind around a concept, problem, teaching, or subject. Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, then you are really my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

Finally, meditation, or reflection, is necessary for study. We look back on what we have studied and we "chew it over" in our minds. We dwell on it, play with it, apply it to different situations, challenge it, defend it, roll it over, put it away and pull it out again, and in all of this we ask God to shape our thinking.

The most important aspect to study, therefore, is not in what we do, but in what God does with our minds. Our thinking and study must begin, continue, and end with a request for God to guide our thoughts in His truth.

Prayer must permeate our study. Henry Simmons wrote, "Too many of us are thinking these days as the world thinks because we do not begin our thinking by thinking about God. Only in paying attention to God will we experience the ecstasy that leads to wisdom. Prayer is that work, that disciplined attentiveness."

Thus prayer and study form a beautiful upward spiral. Study of Scripture informs our prayers about God's character. Prayer invites God to shape our minds as we study. God shapes our minds so we understand Him better which helps us pray more and better, and on and on.

Resources on prayer and study:

Richard Foster, "Prayer"

Henri Nouwen, "With Open Hands" (also his, "The Way of the Heart")

Dallas Willard, "Hearing God"

Andrew Murray, "With Christ in the School of Prayer"

Brother Lawrence, "The Practice of the Presence of God"

Eugene Peterson, "The Contemplative Pastor"

Richard Foster, "Celebration of Discipline"

James Sire, "Habits of the Mind" (also his "Disciplines of the Mind")