

INSIGHTS ON THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF PRAYER

BY SHELLEY FREW

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he stopped, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples."-
-Luke 11:1

Of all the spiritual disciplines prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the father. —Richard Foster

Prayer is a learned spiritual skill. At times it requires a taming of our minds and sustained effort. At other times prayer may mean resting wordlessly in God's presence and trusting in the triune God's word within us. It's a varied, ongoing practice that allows us to enter into communion with God. There are many ways to pray and no specific formula can bring us closer to God. Prayer is more than the words we use and, while Scripture teaches us to pray for our needs, prayer is also much more than what we ask of God in our prayer. Professor and spiritual formation writer M. Robert Mulholland writes in his book *Invitation to a Journey: A Roadmap for Spiritual Formation*:

The consideration of prayer as a classical discipline of the Christian tradition brings us up against the functional priorities of our culture. We tend to think of prayer as something we do in order to produce results we believe are needed or, rather, to get God to produce the results. Go into any Christian bookstore and note the number of books devoted to techniques of prayer. We are interested in knowing what works and developing the skill that will ensure that our prayers are effective. As a result, our prayer tends to be a shopping list of things to be accomplished, an attempt to manipulate the symptoms of our lives without really entering into a deep, vital, transforming relationship with God in the midst of what we think we need (usually forgetting that "your father knows what you need before you ask him" Matthew 6:8) and in the midst of the symptoms of our lives.

Ultimately, prayer can usher us into a "deep, vital, transforming relationship with God." Prayer invites us to let go of our expectations, control, and personal comfort. God will use our time in prayer with him to change us even if the circumstances we pray about never change. Mulholland writes, "Prayer as a classical spiritual discipline draws us into God's involvement in the brokenness of the world on God's terms not ours... Prayer is the act by which the people of God become incorporated into the presence and action of God in the world." He adds, "Prayer becomes a sacrificial offering of ourselves to God, to become agents of God's presence and action in the daily events and situations of our lives. How different this is from the idea of prayer as asking God to change our situation without any involvement on our part!" We can expect prayer to change us, how we view God, and how we view the world. In Luke 11:1 when the disciples ask Jesus to teach him how to pray, Jesus modeled for them the Lord's prayer (Luke 11:1 -4). Keep in mind, the disciples

had spent their lives praying! They have been devout Jews and have been following Jesus, so it is not as if they had never been taught to pray. Regardless of how long we have followed Jesus or how new we may be to the Christian faith, we can always grow in our prayer lives too.

THE ACTS PRAYER

By following the four practices within this prayer format, we will have the opportunity to commune with God in a structured way that helps us to focus our thoughts and attention.

The ACTS prayer involves a time of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication (or praying specifically for our needs for the needs of others). In adoration, we spent time adoring God, his character, his works in creation and in history. It is a time of God-centered praying and worshiping God for who he is. After a period of adoration, we will enter into a period of confession. In a moment of quiet ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind sin you are aware of as well as sin you have been unaware of and confess that before God. Third, we will thank God with grateful hearts for all that he has provided and for the many blessings we experience throughout the day each day. Finally, in a time of supplication we will come to God with our needs and the needs of others. We have the privilege of communing with God in prayer because of our vital relationship with God in Christ Jesus. It is the posture of our heart before God which matters more than the words we use in our time with him, and, through these four different practices, we give God the opportunity to change our hearts even as we pray.

A—Adoration. After a few moments of silence, spend some time in *adoration* of God, his character, and his mighty works in creation and history....

C—Confession. Following a time of adoration, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you where you have sinned either deliberately or without knowledge and confess that to God now...

T—Thanksgiving. Take time now to recount to God with a heart of gratitude all that you are thankful for in the day...

S—Supplication. Finish your time in prayer by communicating to God your needs and desires and the needs of those around you and those in the world...

You could close: *Oh, gracious and loving God, we come before you as grateful people. We are grateful for free access to commune with you in prayer because of your son Jesus Christ, what he did for us on the cross and accomplished upon his resurrection. Thank you for rescuing us from a life of*

darkness and separation from you. In Jesus name and by the power of the Holy Spirit, amen.