

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Prayer in a busy world

In the church we often give the false impression that being a good Christian is possible only for people who aren't actively involved in the real world. One way we do this is by portraying silence, solitude, and plenty of time as essential for prayer.

The Bible speaks of long prayer in quiet solitude, and many Christians through the centuries have found it helpful. Its health benefits are often emphasized, too, even by non-Christians. But time for that kind of prayer is hard to find if you aren't a monk. Since most of us aren't, many of us pray only in Sunday worship services but feel guilty for not praying more often.

[Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.
Luke 7:12

Although lengthy prayer in solitary silence is valuable, it is only valuable if we actually do it. Just thinking about it and feeling guilty about *not* doing it isn't valuable at all. So instead of more advice about reserving lengthy times and special solitary places for prayer, and following a rigid schedule, maybe some of us need a different pattern for prayer. We need one we'll actually use.

Prayer doesn't have to be a grim chore

Unfortunately some Christians make prayer seem unnecessarily hard.

I used to have a friend who shut herself in her clothes closet daily to pray, and she told other people that they should, too. She claimed that "enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray..." (Matthew 6:6, KJV) was a literal, God-given rule for everyone, for all time. Maybe God really wanted her to pray in her closet daily, but I'm quite sure that God doesn't require that of everyone.

Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret...

Matthew 6:6

(continued on page 2)

Praying on the run

A former Sunday School teacher of mine liked to tell about two boys who were walking to school together one morning. When they were still a block away they heard the school bell ring. One boy stopped dead in his tracks. The other one, aghast, asked "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to kneel down and pray that I won't be late for school," his friend answered. "Aren't you?"

Dashing off, the first boy yelled back, "No! I'm going to pray while I run!"

His method is often the best one for busy people. Praying in quiet solitude is valuable, but often we need to pray while we run.



A portable cell

In his book *The Way of the Heart* (Ballantine, 1985), theologian Henri Nouwen emphasizes the value of withdrawing from the world occasionally for prayer and reflection in silence. He compares it to the practice of the third-century Christian monks who retreated to tiny cells they built in the desert. But Nouwen reminds us that we don't have to stay physically withdrawn from the world in order to stay in touch with God. "Silence," Nouwen finds, "is above all a quality of the heart that can stay with us even in our conversation with others. It is a portable cell that we carry with us wherever we go."



A place that you use for solitary prayer can be portable, too, or it can be a place where you already spend time regularly. When I walked alone for exercise early each morning, my walk was my daily time for prayer and reflection. And the shower is often my prayer closet. If you spend a lot of time alone in your car—commuting to work, maybe, or chauffeuring



children to their activities and then waiting—the car can be your portable cell or prayer closet.

Prayer leads to ministry

None of the practices that help us focus our attention on God in solitude are intended to be constant occupations. Spoken prayer, writing in a personal journal, examination of dreams, meditation, silence, scripture reading and reflection, and all other similar practices that Christians use for opening themselves to God and seeking God's will are meant only as preparation for active ministry in the world.

(Prayer in a busy world, continued from page 1)

I've heard other Christians insist that everyone should reserve a specific period of time early every morning for prayer, and should have a special private place for this purpose, but I don't think that's a God-given rule either. Some people find daily early-morning prayer invaluable, but I've never seen any convincing evidence that God gives unique importance to any one time of day.



For a few years I diligently observed a regular early-morning routine of scripture reading, reflection, journal-writing, and prayer. Although it had benefits, I saw that I didn't need to do it forever. I tend to be *too* organized and to feel *too* obligated, and I realized that God was urging me to relax that pattern, not to increase it. But following such a pattern could be just right for someone else.

God isn't a stickler about how we pray

I don't see any evidence of God's being a stickler for details about how we pray. God doesn't seem to care whether we sit, stand, kneel, lie down, or stand on our heads. Closing our eyes or holding

our hands or body in a certain position may help us focus our attention, but this reflects our needs, not God's rules. And God doesn't require us to use any special words for praying, or even to be able to put our prayer into words. What God seems to care about is that we actually pray, that we give God our full attention, and that we be honest with God.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit...

Romans 8:26-27

Many different prayer methods can serve as routes to God. The best one for me won't necessarily be best for you, because we are different and our daily activities are different. Also, the best prayer method for me today may not be the best one for me a year from now, because in some ways I'll be different then and my day-to-day world will be different. ❖



A way for busy people to pray

Episcopal priest and retreat director Ron DelBene teaches an ancient and natural form of prayer that he calls a breath prayer. A breath prayer is simple and short enough to utter many times daily without seeing it as a burdensome, difficult chore. "In our society," DelBene writes in his book *The Breath of Life: A Simple Way to Pray* (Upper Room, 1988), "we tend to feel that if something is to be good, it must be complex. That is just not so."

Breath prayers grow out of current personal needs, clarify who the pray-ers are, and help them understand their relationship with God, Ron says. To find yours, he suggests,

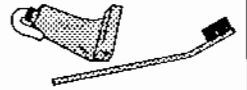
- Sit in silence and remember that God holds you in a loving presence.
- Picture God calling you by name and asking you, "(Your name), what do you want?"
- Answer God simply and directly, and jot down your answer(s).
- To one of your answers, add the name that you usually call God.
- Shorten and reword the answer so that it has only six to eight syllables and has a natural rhythm that flows comfortably when you speak it aloud.



Here are some examples. "Father, lead me into health." "Jesus, guide me in your will." "Lead me in your light, O God." "Show me your way, O Lord."

If you'd rather use a ready-made prayer, try a short, familiar scripture verse, such as one from a Psalm. Or try the ancient "Jesus Prayer"—"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," maybe shortened to "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy" or even "Jesus, mercy."

Choose some times or places in your everyday life that you will use as reminders to say your breath prayer. Get some stick-on colored dots and put them in crucial places as reminders—maybe on your desk, your car dashboard, the TV, or your watch, or with your toothbrush. Or write your breath prayer on index cards or stick-on notes that you put in such places, to fix it in your mind. Each time you see one of your reminders, say your prayer aloud or silently.



Or let some regular everyday event remind you. Breathe your prayer every time the phone rings, or when the school bell rings if you're a teacher. Breathe it every time you wash your hands if you're a doctor, or every time a customer approaches your window if you're a bank teller.

Ron DelBene often uses the prayer with the sick parishioners he visits. For more about this use of a breath prayer, read his book *Into the Light: A Simple Way to Pray with the Sick and the Dying* (Upper Room).

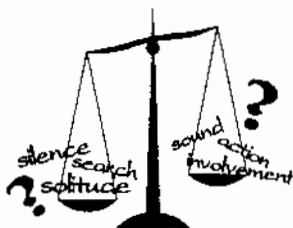


If you're not praying consistently, how about trying a breath prayer for a month and seeing what happens?

Is the active life unspiritual?

Parker J. Palmer is a Quaker who has studied prayer and spirituality and has written numerous books and taught many workshops on the subject. In his book *The Active Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), he writes about the conflict that many Christians see between the world of action and the world of contemplation and prayer.

Palmer sees many Christians mistakenly assuming that a monk-like pattern of prayer and spirituality is what all Christians should aim at. We often find "the world of action portrayed as an arena of ego and power," Palmer observes, "while the world of contemplation is pictured as a realm of light and grace." Portrayals like this lead to guilt feelings for many of us, because we live in the world of action.



"Contemporary images of what it means to be spiritual," Palmer observes, "tend to value the inward search over the outward act, silence over sound, solitude over interaction, centeredness and quietude and balance over engagement and animation and struggle."

"If one is called to monastic life," says Palmer, "those images can be empowering. But if one is called to the world of action, the same images can disenfranchise the soul, for they tend to devalue the energies of active life rather than encourage us to move with those energies toward wholeness."

Activists don't need to live like monks

Palmer once made an unusually diligent effort to practice the contemplative spirituality that is so often recommended for Christians. He joined a group that included two monks, to develop a new form of community. Although the community was not walled off from the world, it followed monastic norms that included a rigorous daily pattern of contemplative prayer.

After three years in the community Palmer dropped out. "I do not thrive on the monastic virtues of stability, centeredness, balance," he found. "As much as I may need those qualities in my life, those words do not name the moments when I feel most alive and most able to share life with others."

"I value spontaneity more than predictability," Palmer now realizes, and "exuberance more than order, inner freedom more than the authority of tradition, the challenge of dialogue more than the guidance of a rule, eccentricity more than staying on dead center."

Palmer sees that leading a full and vital active life is not failure in any sense. Failure, he finds instead, "is to withdraw fearfully from the place to which one is called, to squander the most precious of all our birthrights—the experience of aliveness itself." ❖

active life isn't spiritual failure!

We pray in different ways

In their book *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types* (The Open Door, 1984), Chester P. Michael and Marie C. Norissey show how differences in personality and temperament influence our ways of praying.

The prayer of some activists, Michael and Norissey point out, is mainly "the prayer of good works." It isn't words, spoken or unspoken. Celebration is another form of prayer that appeals to these outward-looking people who thrive on the visible, audible, and tangible. They don't pray well by being silent or by doing any kind of writing or reflection. To them silence seems like doing nothing, which feels deadening.



People with this viewpoint make up a high proportion of the U.S. population and thus a high proportion of the people God wants us to reach with the Gospel. But they're a low proportion of our church attenders, and it's no wonder. Our typical worship services and classes are overloaded with what these people find deadening, so on Sunday mornings they're more likely to go somewhere else where they can find lively action and celebration.

We're also missing many of the people for whom written reflection, questioning, extensive reading, and rigorous discussion of many different viewpoints are essential for seeing God's presence and growing in faith. To many of our present members these practices seem like study, argument, or even unbelief, rather than prayer. But they are prayer for some people.



To reach the missing people and help them see God's presence, we'll have to make some changes in our churches' worship services and classes. We'll have to add opportunities for many different kinds of prayer.

What does it mean to be spiritual?

Being spiritual doesn't mean being sticky-sweet, unworldly, impractical, or unrealistic. It doesn't mean speaking in hushed tones, sitting quietly in a church sanctuary, or hearing quiet organ music. It doesn't require using ancient, churchy words. Being spiritual simply means being aware of God's presence in the world. It means acknowledging that the visible, touchable physical world isn't all of reality.

Spirituality means being aware of God's presence in all of life, and paying attention to what God is doing and calling us to do.

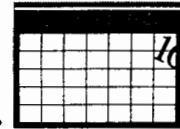
We can live in the real world and be spiritual. In fact, especially if we're lay Christians, the real everyday world is the very place in which God wants us to live, pray, and do the ministries that God calls us to do. In our churches we need to make that clear. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

What century is this?

Christians don't seem to know.




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Prayer in a busy world

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice. 
Psalm 141:2

O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch. 
Psalm 5:3


 Praise God with trumpet sound; praise God with lute and harp!

Praise God with tambourine and dance; praise God with strings and pipe! 

Praise God with clanging cymbals; praise God with loud clashing cymbals! 

Psalm 150:3-5

We pray in many ways . . .

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. 
Matthew 22:37

The Lord is in the holy temple; let all the earth keep silence...
Habakkuk 2:20

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.
Isaiah 12:6

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18