

PRAYER: A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE

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“It’s enough to bring you to your knees!” How often have we heard this in the face of anxiety or despair? It’s a reminder that one form of prayer, as well as the ultimate need for prayer, have been woven into the fabric of the culture, whether or not the one expressing it understands the origin of the phrase.

Among Christians, prayer takes many different forms, in part depending upon culture, in part denominational approach, in part personal preference. Some use many words; some few. Some stand to pray; some kneel or lie prostrate. Some chant; others are silent. Some see prayer as a corporate responsibility and value the time spent together with others; some see it as an intensely personal matter and get nervous at the thought of praying with other people.

But regardless of differences in form, there are certain principles that impact the *life* in our prayer life.

Principle #1: Our prayers are limited by our understanding of God

It is relatively easy for us as Christians to believe that God has created human beings in His own image, even though we may not fully grasp what that means. It is much more difficult for us to recognize that often we create God in our own image. Rather than seek to know more and more of Him, at some point in our faith journey we have a tendency to stop, and to say figuratively, “God, this is as far as I go in my understanding of you. I know enough, and I am content with what I know.”

We then begin shaping our prayers to accommodate our understanding of God, rather than pray for greater understanding. As a result, we often limit what God is able to do through us because we have already closed the door to Him.

Andrew Murray, a South African devotional writer and Christian leader, has written, “Beware in your prayer, above everything, of limiting God, not only by unbelief, but by fancying that you know what he can do.”

As another Christian leader has expressed it, “Don’t apply to God what you know about your circumstances; apply to your circumstances what you know about God.” Only be certain that what you ‘know’ about God accurately reflects Him.

Take a few minutes to think through who you believe God is, what you believe He is capable of doing, what His characteristics are, and what size He is in relation to you and your circumstances. Then compare that to the God you meet in the pages of the Bible. If you are not engaged in regular Bible reading, there’s no better time than now to start, and no better way to get an accurate understanding of God.

Principle #2: Prayer is personal

Since real people engage in prayer, it must be personal, right? Well, that’s half right. In point of fact, prayer *is* personal, not because it involves one person, but because it involves two beings, one visible to human eyes, the other invisible.

Mother Teresa has said, “Prayer is simply talking to God. He speaks to us: we listen. We speak to him: he listens. A two way process: speaking and listening.” The problem many of us have is that we want it to be a monologue: we talk, He listens. The only word we want to hear from Him is “Yes.”

God has a manifold vocabulary. There are many things He wants to say to us, much He wants us to know, to experience, to learn. That often can’t be done within the limited context that we try to impose on Him.

Norman Grubb, a missionary statesman, writer and theological teacher, had a refreshing approach to the personal aspect of prayer. “Good morning, God, I love you! What are you up to today? I want to be a part of it.”

Principle #3: Prayer requires that we let God in

If we are not wise in our approach, prayer can become an intensely selfish act. Unless we focus on God, it can easily begin with ourselves, continue with ourselves, and end with ourselves. If we were to remove the first person singular pronoun from many of our prayers, we’d be left with little more than a shopping list. “I want...” “I need...” “Please, God, do this for me...” Little wonder that we often leave our time of prayer as distraught and discouraged as when we started it!

Alan Redpath, author of *Victorious Prayer* and *Blessings Out of Buffetings*, has captured the tension inherent in prayer: “Much of our praying is just asking God to bless some folks that are ill and to keep us plugging along. But prayer is not merely prattle: it is warfare.”

The application of prayer in times of spiritual warfare is commonplace. But the warfare that Redpath is speaking of is far more than warfare against the Enemy. It actually begins within ourselves, and involves a battle to determine who has supremacy in our lives – our ‘selves’ or God. “When we pray, we relinquish in a radical way our so-called sovereignty over the purposes of our lives. We subordinate our plans, schedules and life scenarios to the infinitely wiser and more joyful work of God’s hands.” (Benjamin Patterson, a contributing editor to *Christianity Today*).

Principle #4 Prayer at its deepest is both a radical act and the greatest expression of freedom.

Prayer in its deepest sense is a radical departure from our normal human tendency. Instead of “me first”, we put God ahead of ourselves, accepting that He is Creator, we are creatures; that He is Redeemer of the lost and the broken, we are in need of redemption; that He is the Sustainer, without whose breath/Spirit within us we are life-less.

It is radical as well because we trust God instead of ourselves. We give up the right to privacy from the Creator and place every circumstance, attitude, desire, want and need before Him, in the certainty that we are safe with Him, with no need for masks or delusions or fears.

Prayer, says the Christian author Ray Anderson, “is not a means of removing the unknown and unpredictable elements in life, but rather a way of including the unknown and unpredictable in the outworking of the grace of God in our lives.”

There is nothing that cannot be brought to God in prayer. In fact, the Bible is very clear – there is nothing of which God is not already aware, nothing about which He is ignorant. So why not consciously bring it to Him and ask for His help in sorting through it all?

To let God in to the innermost part of our being, into the recesses of our mind and heart, is to ultimately know the joy of sharing our deepest secrets with One who is absolutely trustworthy, willing to forgive, and capable of giving us a fresh start in life.

Principle #5: God communicates with each of us in a unique way

If prayer is two-way communication, then God must communicate with us. Yet we often treat with suspicion the one who says he or she has heard from God. The question for many is, “Can I really hear from God?”

Dictating into our computer, or using voice activation to make a phone call on our Blackberry or other device, can produce hilarious results as a computer chip struggles to make sense out of something we just said. With practice however, the chip gets us trained to speak clearly and in well modulated tones, so that the number of errors gradually reduces to almost zero.

Like the computer chip, we often don't get it right in the early stages of our relationship with God. It takes multiple exposures to the sound of a voice before we recognize it. Similarly, it takes multiple exposures to God before an individual begins to recognize the unique way He communicates with that person.

Fortunately, with practice and with a heart focused on serving Him, we become more skilled at hearing His voice, more willing to follow Him, and less intent on hearing what *we* want to hear.

God may communicate through a thought that will not go away, or through the voice of a family member or a friend; He may speak in a comment from a stranger. Some even hear a physical voice. By looking back over the times when one was certain that he or she had heard from God, one can begin to discern a pattern. The more we communicate with God through prayer, the more confident we can become that we are hearing from Him in the way He has chosen to speak to us. The more often we are exposed to His 'voice', the more confident we can be that we really are hearing from God.

Beyond form, beyond even principles, prayer is the greatest gift we can ever receive - that we can be open, personal, and transparent before a loving, sovereign God, who communicates with each of us in a unique way. E.M Bounds, who has written several classics on prayer, summarizes it this way: “To see God, to know God, and to live for God – these form the objectives of all true praying.”