

## THE ESSENCE OF PRAYER

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Dr. Phil, well-known television host, psychologist and dispenser of popular wisdom, has a habit of asking his guests, “So, how’s it working for you so far?” The “it” he refers to is a set of behaviours that the individual or couple have developed in an effort to deal with a particular set of recurring circumstances. Invariably, the answer is, “Not well.” The assumption of course, is that if “it” was working well, they wouldn’t be guests on his show.

I’ve had occasion to think about that a lot recently, not in relation to recurring circumstances, but in relation to prayer. If we are honest with ourselves we’ll admit that we tend to get into ‘prayer habits’, and that frequently those prayer habits don’t work very well for us. It may be that we neglect to pray at all, or that we tend to fire off ‘bullet prayers’ when we are feeling particularly stressed or out of control. We may find that we are praying the same old tired prayer every time we try to approach God, or that our mind wanders to the day’s agenda, family challenges, a desired vacation, or something else that seems less than godly. From time to time we need to ask ‘the Dr. Phil question:’ “how’s it working for you so far?”

Funk & Wagnall’s Canadian College Dictionary offers no less than eight definitions for the word “prayer”. One of them captures the way we sometimes feel about prayer and the manner in which we approach God. Strangely enough, it’s not a definition that has anything to do with things spiritual. Rather, it applies to the realm of law. “In a bill of equity, [prayer is] the request that the court will grant the aid sought by the complainant; also the part of the bill containing this request.”

Isn’t that the way we sometimes approach God? We are complainants beseeching Him to grant the aid we seek. There’s nothing particularly wrong about that. Jesus Himself refers to God as “our Father” who would no more turn a deaf ear to our requests than an

earthly Father would give a stone to the child who asked for bread. “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11) There is nothing inherently wrong either in requesting aid, or asking that God will grant the aid we seek.

But to restrict ourselves to such a secular, litigious view of prayer is to miss out on a whole additional dimension. The dictionary provides another definition: prayer is “spiritual communion with God, and awareness of his presence, as in praise, thanksgiving, confession, etc.”

“Spiritual communion with God.” What a rich image these words convey! The same dictionary defines “communion” as, among other things, “a mutual sharing of thoughts, feelings, etc.” Suddenly we are moved out of the realm of pleading, beseeching, imploring, into the realm of sharing, exchanging, conversing with One who is present to us. And the transaction that takes place is not that between a complainant and a judge, but between two parties who *mutually* share. God is as engaged in prayer as we are. Through prayer, and in prayer, we can become acutely aware of the presence of God, and we can share not only our own thoughts and feelings, but His. We can *expect* that God will be an active part of our prayer time.

But there is more to a vital life of prayer than even that. It is not simply that we are at liberty to bring our requests to God, or that we can expect to share thoughts and feelings with Him. It’s also that there are many dimensions to prayer. The dictionary identifies three: “praise, thanksgiving, confession.” Intercession and supplication are two more. The well-known acronym ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication) captures four of the dimensions. In point of fact however, anything that constitutes conversation between two friends is grist for one’s prayer time. Prayer, after all, is the most intimate of sharing times when we “commune” with One whose range of interests and involvement encompasses the entire universe. Nothing lies outside His purview. There is nothing that impacts us, our families, our work, our community, our nation, our world, which is too insignificant to share with Him. Whether it is the deep pain of

terminal illness, bereavement, marriage break-down, job loss, bankruptcy, moral failure, or other condition, or the joyful times of laughter and celebration – all can be incorporated into our prayer time, and shared at the deepest level with God.

Communion with God means also that prayer is not something confined to a particular posture, time of day, type of language or other limitation. It can occur as much in the midst of confusion and hectic activity as in the quiet of one's private space at home.

Many churches have a formalized Prayer Time. Traditionally it has been Wednesday night, but the times and days vary from one church to another. If it is like the ones at our church, a large percentage of the time is spent in conversation, sharing and identifying specific items and individuals for whom we will pray during 'the real prayer time'. It is tempting to get agitated as the clock ticks away and the prayer list grows longer, wanting to get into the time of prayer. Such impatience misses the point. Of course, times of quiet prayer, of intimate, shared groanings of the human spirit, aided by the Holy Spirit, are an important part of one's prayer life. But we should not think for a moment that God does not also share in those times when we are talking with others, with our eyes wide open, identifying prayer "items". Those times too are times of prayer, just as much as the times when our heads are bowed and our eyes are closed and we take turns talking to God. Communion, which is the essence of prayer, occurs in the sharing of concerns with each other (when God listens in on our conversation), just as surely as it does when we direct our concerns formally to Him.

Prayer is active and dynamic. It is both messy and orderly. It is talking and listening. Prayer is inviting God into our conversations and daily lives, and letting Him direct us rather than seeking to direct Him. It is public and private, active and passive, noisy and quiet. It is the stuff of which life is made.

"How's it working for you so far?"