



### ***Spiritual Practices to Bring Us Closer to God: Prayer***

Continuing on our journey toward the Lenten season, one of the most important spiritual practices we have is prayer. Richard Foster (Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth) said, "Of all the Spiritual Disciplines, prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father."

There are many different ways in which to pray.

One which we learn early in life is the rote prayer, those memorized prayers. They may include "Now I lay me down to sleep," "God is great, God is good," and "The Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2). However, I find that we can pray the Lord's Prayer in a different way, giving it additional meaning. When you pray, pause after each phrase, e.g., "hallowed be thy name," and talk with God about that phrase. Let God know how much you respect and honor God's name. If you do this with every phrase, the Lord's Prayer will take on new meaning, becoming a special time in which you actually communicate your love and your feelings to God.

A second way to pray is the A.C.T.S. prayer. Each of the letters in this acronym stands for a particular kind of prayer, and the order makes good sense as you pray it:

A - Adoration; describing how much you love God;

C - Confession; admitting the mistakes you have made, and asking forgiveness;

T - Thanksgiving; listing the many ways in which God has blessed you and others;

S - Supplication; asking God's healing presence for others and for yourself.

The A.C.T.S. prayer helps to keep a balance in our prayer life so that we are not just seeking God when we need help for ourselves and others (supplication). Sometimes I have used this prayer form when I pray the pastoral prayer on Sunday mornings. It keeps me focused in my private and my public prayer life.

A third kind of prayer is the scripture prayer. The entire book of Psalms (all 150 of them) is a book of many different kinds of prayers. The Psalms contain all the feelings which we express to God – including love, joy, thanksgiving, concern, suffering, anger, hatred, and revenge. I have always been impressed by the psalmist's complete faith and trust in God, even in those 'difficult, hate-filled' psalms when the author asked God to do terrible things to his or her enemies. By turning the situation over to God, the psalmist got rid of the hatred and vengeance, and probably knew, deep-down, that God would continue to be a God of love. But how good the psalmist felt to get rid of that anger and hatred!

Reading the stories of Jesus is another form of scripture prayer. If I read the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers, I pause to offer prayers for his compassion and ask him to help me show compassion. I name people who need compassion either from, or for, others.

A fourth kind of prayer is the hymn prayer. Every Wednesday I lead a 90-minute Prayer-Bible Study group. One Wednesday a month we have "Silent, Directed Prayer." We enter in silence and spend 45 minutes (the prayer portion) praying silently. A prepared handout includes a quotation from a classical spiritual author; a thought based on that quotation; two scriptures to read; two suggested hymns to read and pray (hymnals available at the door); and then listed prayer concerns by categories – world, national, community, church. We've learned to 'pray through a

hymn.' You read one line or phrase of the hymn, and then pray about how those words touch your life, thoughts, and needs. Quite often these hymn prayers bring new understanding to our lives.

A fifth kind of prayer is the breath prayer. This is a prayer in which you breathe in and out as you pray phrases of a prayer. I use the Jesus Prayer, mostly, for my breath prayer. This spiritual practice can calm our minds, souls, and bodies, as it lowers anxieties and blood pressure. Used by the Eastern Church for centuries, the words I pray are: Lord Jesus Christ . . . Son of the Living God . . . have mercy on me . . . a sinner. Before I begin, I sit quietly, both feet on the floor, hands in my lap (palms up as a sign of receptivity), and breathe in slowly and deeply. When I feel calm and centered, I pray the first phrase (Lord Jesus Christ) as I breathe in slowly, and then focus on that phrase as I breathe out. This is my prayer of choice during times of stress, difficult decisions, and in the middle of the night.

These five ways of praying (rote, A.C.T.S., scripture, hymn and breath) do not exhaust the possibilities of prayer. They are, however, a place to begin as we strive to draw closer to God.