

Sermon

Keeping the Focus in Prayer

Prayer is Communication with God

In its essence, prayer is communion with God. It is, as it were, the nourishing umbilical cord that connects us with God. It's possible to read the Bible and still be a mean person. It's possible to pray and still be a mean person. But a person with the Word of God in their hand and a prayer in their heart cannot be a mean person.

Hazards of the Prayer Life – The Wandering Mind

Because prayer is communication with God, it is well to remember that, like all communication, there is an occupational hazard, and that is keeping the focus. Let me explain. Haven't we all at one time been talking with someone when the person says, "How's that again?" This often means that momentarily while you were talking to them they lost their focus and began to think of something else. This same situation can happen when we're praying.

Hazards of the Prayer Life - Sleepiness

Another “occupational hazard” of prayer is the tendency to fall asleep as we pray. We need to acknowledge this right up front, because when we determine we are going to give God quality time in our lives, the devil often tries to thwart our good intentions by making us sleepy.

Some years ago something happened at a church that illustrates this point. Apparently, a member was afflicted by an evil spirit, and a group was called in to have special prayer. As they were about to pray, the devil began to speak through the voice of the afflicted person. I would not recommend what happened next, but apparently the group asked the devil a question or two. Someone asked the evil spirit if it ever went to church. The representative of Satan replied that he goes to church every week. Then the question was asked what he does in church, and he admitted he makes the people go to sleep. There is no doubt that the devil is a liar and must not be trusted, but the old father of lies told the truth this time!

Several years ago, a revivalist related that he had presented a prayer seminar in a certain church. He returned some months later and was standing at the door greeting the people as they left the service. A young man took his hand and informed the speaker that he had attended the previous seminar. Then and there he

had determined that from that time on he would spend time alone each day with the Lord. The very next day, he got up an hour earlier than usual to spend time in prayer. He said that day had been one of the best of all his spiritual experience.

But when the revivalist asked him how it had been going since that time, he confessed with some chagrin that he was unable to get up early the second day. Furthermore, things got worse and worse until, he said ruefully, it was becoming difficult for him to even get up to go to work on time! It was as though the devil had come along with a tube of Super Glue and squeezed it down the middle of his bed, and he felt stuck.

There is no doubt that one of the devil's best tools against prayer is sleep. If you find yourself fighting sleep, you are not alone. It doesn't mean that you don't love Jesus or that you are insincere or a hypocrite. It is interesting to note that Scripture relates two important times when the devil used sleep to change history.

Jesus had taken three of His disciples with him--Peter, James and John--into a mountain to pray. The story is found in Luke 9: 28-33. Verse 33 tells it like it was. "But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw His glory, and the two men that stood with Him." Notice, Jesus

took them up to the mountain to pray and witness a spectacular glimpse of His glory, and what happened? They went to sleep!

The sleep that changed history was the one that occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane. Notice Matthew 24: 40-41: "And He cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, 'What, could ye not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'"

As a result of their sleeping, they were not able to resist the temptation to run, and within hours Peter was denying he even knew Jesus. And so when a person gets serious about prayer, sleepiness will be a factor they will have to deal with.

Suggestions to Keep Focused

Here are some suggestions on how to keep focused and stay awake during the time you spend with the Lord in prayer.

Physical Posture

First, it is important to consider the position that we assume when we are in our quiet time praying to the Lord. This is an important consideration, because, needless to say, getting out of bed and going directly to our knees beside the bed could be too relaxing.

Remember, we are not referring to what position we should assume when we are praying in church but during the times we spend alone with Him.

One way to pray is kneeling in the traditional sense. Others who have spent special time alone with God have found it a help to prostrate themselves before Him; in other words, down on the face before the Lord.

We may also pray sitting down in a chair or sofa. Sometimes we may find it helpful to pray standing up. We should bear in mind that the physical position we assume in prayer is something we do to express ourselves to Him at a particular moment. Our position can change from time to time and from day to day. The nature and urgency of the prayer often indicates the position we assume.

Aloud or Silently?

A word could be said about how we talk with the Lord. We are accustomed to talking out loud to Him when we are in the presence of other people, but we are often not comfortable praying out loud when we are alone. People sometimes say they don't want to talk out loud in their private prayers because they don't want the devil to hear what they have to say. In principle it doesn't matter

whether the devil hears our prayers or not, because He that is in

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us is stronger than he that is in the world. We don't need to let the devil dictate how we choose to talk with the Lord. Some have suggested that praying out loud when they are alone in their private devotions is something very special. After all, when we talk with our friends we talk out loud!

Eyes Closed or Open?

Some often wonder if when we are alone with God we should pray with our eyes open or with our eyes closed. Let me come at this concern another way. First, it goes without saying that prayer is conversation with God, and we all are aware that in any conversation the mind can tend to wander. Perhaps you have experienced that yourself, when you are praying alone with your eyes closed and your mind begins to wander. Some have found that they can keep focused better when their eyes are open. We close our eyes to keep ourselves from being distracted, but if we are distracted by errant thoughts with our eyes closed, there is nothing wrong with opening them to get back on track.

When to Pray

The best time to begin our prayer life is in the morning. One person said with tongue in cheek that if an angel were to come down from heaven and announce that we could pray only one time during the day (of course this would never happen), we should chose the

morning. In some ways it could be said that the prayer at the end of the day is what we offer when, as it were, the damage has already been done. We have made our mistakes, and bedtime is the time to be sure everything is in order again. On the other hand, the prayer at the beginning of the day is the prayer that not so much gets us out of trouble as helps to prevent trouble in the first place. It is the prayer that puts us firmly on the Lord's side. Then, when temptations come during the day, we don't have to wait for a minute to decide whether we are going to yield or not. Our morning commitment has, as it were, put us firmly on the Lord's side.

How Long a Time Should We Spend?

How long should we spend with the Lord in the morning? If you have not been spending any time at all, then even five minutes would be great. One can be motivated as to how much time he can choose to spend alone with the Lord when he remembers the words of Jesus when He asked His disciples if they wouldn't pray with Him just one hour. We might take this as a guideline for ourselves—an hour with our Maker.

What Can We Do With the Time?

This brings up a practical question that many ask, and that is, How in the world can a person pray for a whole hour? This is a good question

and one that has a practical solution. Spending time alone with God is not intended to be a one-sided conversation. It is a time for contemplation, meditation, inspiration, and education. It is a time in which we devote all our attention to looking at life from God's perspective and allowing the Holy Spirit to transform us into the likeness of the Divine. So what are some of the kinds of things we can do when we spend an hour with Jesus?

Pray

Of course, as we have already referenced, it is time to express our feelings and requests either verbally or in our minds. In other words, prayer is an important part of our time with Jesus.

Write a Prayer

Perhaps you may not have considered it before, but there can be a special blessing in writing a prayer. We write letters and emails to our friends. There is Biblical justification for writing our prayers. If David hadn't written his prayers, we wouldn't have the Psalms. If you haven't yet written a prayer to God, why not give it a try. Some have said they like to do this because it helps keep them focused.

Others have found it special to choose a meaningful Psalm and copy it.

Try this sometime using your own words. One person said that
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from time to time he ends his written prayer with the words, "Your son", and then he writes his name. I like that. After all, aren't we His sons and daughters?

Read the Bible

Of course, a major component of our morning devotional time should be spent in reading the Word. Notice I said reading the Word rather than studying the Word. Let me explain what I mean. If someone were to ask you, "Would you like to study the newspaper?" more likely you might respond, "Thank you, but I don't have time." On the other hand, if the person were to ask, "Would you like to read the newspaper?" your answer would probably be, "Yes, thanks." Reading sounds more restful than studying. There is a time for everything under the sun, and our quiet time with God may not be the best time to "study."

Some people set as their goal to read the Bible from cover to cover during their morning devotions. Surely there are many people who do this and are blessed by it. On the other hand, there are huge numbers of people who start off on a journey through the Bible, and when they get to Deuteronomy they get bogged down and the trip may very well abort. It might be less complicated to read here a little and there a little. In other words, simply read what warms the heart and feeds the soul on that particular day. Many

have found that in the morning the Psalms can be especially meaningful. Others have been inspired by beginning the day in the gospels, which is the story of Jesus' life when He was here on earth.

Keep a Journal

Another element many employ during quiet time with the Lord is keeping a journal. Some refer to it as a prayer journal. There are many ways to keep a journal. It can be a record of our spiritual journey. It can be used as a spiritual diary in which we look back on the things that happened yesterday that had important spiritual implications--a kind of spiritual debriefing. The journal can be a place to reflect and express in writing questions, as well as the possible answers, to challenges that we may have in our lives at the moment. It becomes an opportunity to do some serious thinking, where important concerns may be resolved. It also may include our list of prayer requests as well.

Read Devotional Books

The time we spend alone with God is an opportunity to read some of the great classics that have to do with prayer or the practical aspects of the Christian life. There are a large number of books to choose from. It is most helpful to read those which will feed the practical

Christian life. The Conflict of the Ages Series is a great place to begin.

There are so many different things a person can do during the hour alone with God that there may be not enough time to do them all every day. This is a good thing, however; because making our time with Jesus simply a routine can over time result in a loss of real meaning. Our time with the Lord should be fresh every day.

The subject of prayer is very deep and very wide. Prayer and the time we spend alone with God is like a spiritual umbilical cord that keeps us connected to the Almighty. Through prayer, the wonderful healing grace of the gospel is brought into our innermost being.

As was mentioned early, prayer changes history. If Peter had prayed He wouldn't have denied the Lord. Prayer would have prevented David's fiasco. Prayer did protect Joseph. Prayer saved the three Hebrew children. Prayer saved Daniel; and prayer will save us!