

FRUITFULNESS: THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

by Dan Trygg

What is prayer? Prayer is conversing with God. It is a communion with Him, both listening and speaking. It is a time of worshipping Him, of petitioning Him, and listening for His response. **Prayer is *not* informing God of our needs.** In Mt. 6:8, Jesus plainly declared to us, "...your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Therefore, the methodology of the prophets of Baal (I Kg. 18:20f.), who were attempting to get the attention of their pseudo-god, is completely ridiculous for the one who knows the true God. Such methodology is rightly described as meaningless repetition (Mt. 6:7). Their increasingly wild and dramatic efforts to reach their god, who apparently was preoccupied elsewhere, were appropriately mocked and scorned by Elijah, the prophet of God Almighty (I Kg. 18:27). Our all-knowing God, who can discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart (I Chr. 28:9; Heb. 4:12,13; Jer. 17:10) and understands the contents of our minds from a distance (Ps. 139:2), even He who sees in secret (Mt. 6:4,6,18), has no need to be informed of anything. He knows it all in advance (Ps. 139:4).

If prayer is not to inform God of our needs, then why is it necessary to pray? If God knows everything, why does He not give what is needed without our intercession? We are definitely commanded and encouraged to pray (Col. 4:2-4; I Thess. 5:17; Eph. 6:18; I Sam. 12:23; I Pet. 4:7), and there are many promised advantages that come from prayer, but why does God require it and expect it of us? The answer to this question is, as we have seen before, that **there is a partnership relationship which God desires to develop and maintain with humankind.** He created us with free will and intends for us to exercise it in every aspect of our lives, in order to confirm His will and affirm our dependence upon Him. In that regard, prayer is essentially an expression of faith and worship.

Prayer is an expression of a heart of faith in several ways. Faith is a confident trust in the veracity of God's revealed truth. Toward God, **faith is expressed by prayer in that it is, at bottom, an action of the belief that: (1.) God is able to meet the need of my petition (Rom. 4:23); and, (2.) God is willing to act on my behalf.** Without these two ingredients, in at least seed form, we would not consider praying at all. If we did not think that God could make a difference, we would not bother to pray. Furthermore, if we thought that He might be able, but that He was uninterested in puny, little us and our insignificant concerns, we would likewise not waste our breath. **The fundamental, bottom-line ingredients to both prayer and faith are, in the words of Heb. 11:6, "He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him."** Can there be a more pure expression of that faith than in the action of prayer? How ridiculous, at least to the unbelieving observer, for us to speak into the air about things which we feel we cannot do ourselves, or to be asking for the direction and ability which are beyond ourselves. For the outside observer, there is no immediate reward for prayer, nothing tangible to be gained, unless there is a God and He does truly answer those who seek Him. Without faith, prayer is unexplainable; and prayer is the purest expression of faith.

Prayer is worship. It is an acted choice, an investment of life, effort, and energy, designed to develop, maintain, and express our relationship of dependence upon God. It conveys our trust in His ability and willingness to come to our aid. It exalts Him as God. It lifts Him up as our confessed source of life and provision, our All in all (I Cor. 15:28). It honors Him as the One whom we envision as worth our attention and time. It is the heartfelt expression of our faith that the unseen things are more "real", more powerful, than this seen world of daily experience. It recognizes that there is more to reality and existence than what we see, smell, hear, taste, or touch. God is given praise and honor, both by the direct verbal expression of His worth and His glory, and by our coming to Him and presenting our needs to Him in an acted-out expression of our dependence. **It is an acknowledgment of our dependence upon Him for life.** In that regard, the essence of abiding in the

Vine is to be found in the place of prayer, since abundant fruitfulness finds its beginning, support, and maturity in our communion with Him.

Father, we are so grateful for the tremendous privilege granted to us in prayer. It is amazing that You, the Creator of this vast universe, should desire to condescend to listen to us with our seemingly insignificant concerns. It is a glaring example to us of Your incredible love for us. Fill us with awe that You, the Creator, would commune with the creature; You, the Holy One, would listen to us even in the dregs of our moral uncleanness; and that You, the Infinite One, should pay heed to our limited, finite thoughts and desires. We see, too, Father, that Your interest goes far beyond mere curiosity in us and our peculiarities. You have forever displayed Your committed concern for our redemption and our exaltation as Your own children through the cross and the shed blood of Jesus Christ Your Son. Because of Him we can, indeed, have boldness to enter into communion with You. We know that not only are we acceptable to You by virtue of His cleansing blood, but also by virtue of Your demonstrated love. We are encouraged to come boldly and freely into Your accepting, yet forever holy, presence.

Open our eyes to see the wonder of this privilege, that we might cherish it, and You, accordingly. Draw us to come to You in prayer to give You the glory, honor, worship, and praise that You deserve.

FOR MEDITATION: Hebrews 11: 6.

"And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him."

Spiritual Disciplines: Intended For Interior Blessing, Not Exterior Control

"The Spiritual Disciplines are intended for our good. They are meant to bring the abundance of God into our lives. It is possible, however, to turn them into another set of soul-killing laws. Law-bound Disciplines breathe death.

"Jesus teaches that we must go beyond the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). Yet we need to see that their righteousness was no small thing. They were committed to following God in a way that many of us are not prepared to do. One factor, however, is always central to their righteousness: externalism. Their righteousness consisted in control over externals, often including the manipulation of others. The extent to which we have gone beyond the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees is seen in how much our lives demonstrate the internal work of God upon the heart. To be sure, this will have external results, but the work will be internal.

"When the Disciplines degenerate into law, they are used to manipulate and control people. We take explicit commands and use them to imprison others. Such a deterioration of the Spiritual Disciplines results in pride and fear. Pride takes over because we come to believe that we are the right kind of people. Fear takes over because we dread losing control.

"If we are to progress in the spiritual walk so that the Disciplines are a blessing and not a curse, we must come to the place in our lives where we can lay down the everlasting burden of always needing to manage others. This drive, more than any single thing, will lead us to turn the Spiritual Disciplines into laws. Once we have made a law, we have an 'externalism' by which we judge who is measuring up and who is not. Without laws the Disciplines are primarily an internal work, and it is impossible to control an internal work. When we genuinely believe that inner transformation is God's work and not ours, we can put to rest our passion to set others straight."

Abridged from Celebration of Discipline, Revised Edition by Richard J. Foster (Harper & Row: New York, 1988), Pp. 9-11.