

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Learning to Pray”
Keeping Company with God, pt. 2
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Well, I’m at it again this year. After completing my first triathlon on sabbatical last spring, I had this notion that maybe I could try to do one a year. And so, I set a goal of staying in shape after the race. I was going to keep it real simple... just get in one swim, one bike ride, and one run each week. That should be doable.

But life being what it is, I didn’t keep up with it. Not even close. I mean, who has the time?

And well... I know I should go run right now,
but I think I’ll eat this donut instead.

Then came January... and I was feeling a little bloated after all that holiday splurging... and I started looking at the summer calendar and getting the itch again. I read about races. I started thinking about training plans. So, with snow on the ground I put on my warmest running gear and went outside.

It was then that I realized something about myself: I sure like thinking about this stuff more than I like doing it. Since then there has been an occasional day where I’ve looked forward to get out and working up a sweat, but most days... I’d rather just take a nap.

The triathlon I’m working toward is at Innsbrook in just a couple weeks now, so I’ve been training for about 5 months. I was talking to my older brother the other day about all the miles I’ve been putting in at which point he gave me this strange look and asked me the question only a good older brother asks: **“Why in the world are you doing this?”**

Of course, that’s the question I ask just about every time I walk out the door. Why did I think this was a good idea? But over the last few months I’ve noticed something. As hard as it is to get started each day... to just show up, I’m almost always glad I did after I’m finished.

Prayer is a lot like that. Sometimes just getting started is the hardest part. And even when you do sit down and decide to pray... the distractions can be endless.

The computer dings. There’s another email in you inbox.
I wonder if it’s important. I better check.
Your phone vibrates. A text message.
Might be your mom.

Suddenly I've got to go to the bathroom which is really distracting when you're trying to pray, so you might as well take care of it first.

And, of course now the kids are knocking on my door.

And before you know it... the whole thing is a loss.

In some ways, prayer is the simplest spiritual practice there is. All you have to do is show up. Sit still. And say, "I'm here." But those that have tried it for any amount of time along the way know... it's a whole lot easier to think about it than do it, because a lot of days you're going to have a nagging question, **"Why did I think this is a good idea today? I don't have time right now. Maybe tomorrow."**

There's a story from the Desert Fathers, where a group of students went to one of the great spiritual teachers, Abba Agathon, and asked, **"Amongst all our different activities, father, which is the virtue that requires the greatest effort?"**

Abba Agathon answered, **"Forgive me, but I think there is no labor greater than praying to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies the demons try to prevent him; for they know that nothing obstructs them so much as prayer to God. In everything else that a man undertakes, if he perseveres, he will attain rest. But in order to pray a man must struggle to his last breath."**¹

Prayer is hard.

It is one those most basic practices of faith... and somehow at the same time... it is one of the most challenging. Even Teresa of Avila, a master of prayer, admits to shaking the sand in her sixteenth-century hourglass to make her hour of prayer go by a little faster.² So, if you don't think you're very good at it, or don't think you know how, relax. You're in good company. Even the masters of prayer feel that way.

One spiritual teacher says, **"Learning to pray, like learning to talk, read, or walk, takes time and involves trial and error. The process will doubtless include feelings of awkwardness and failure. [In fact, it's a lot like learning all those grammar rules in the English language. It feels awkward at first, but] Like grammar, the "rules" of prayer have the ultimate goal of making it a natural act."**³

One of the best ways to start learning those foundational rules is by studying the prayers of the bible. There are over 650 of them.

Some short and some long,

Prayers that reflect all kinds of emotions and circumstances...

The prayers of Abraham, Moses and Marium.

Prayers of prophets and kings and peasants and slaves.

Of course the entire book of Psalms.

The prayers of Jesus.

¹ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 105.

² Yancy, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?*, 184.

³ Ibid., 170.

And Prayers of Paul and the other apostles.
From start to finish, the bible is full of prayers.

One of the prayers that always grips me is Hannah's prayers in 1 Samuel 1. Hannah was barren and her heart ached for a child.. a child that never came. One year when she and her husband's household went to Shilo for their annual pilgrimage and worship, Hannah was especially overwhelmed with heartache.

She couldn't eat.
Tears kept coming to her eyes.

After supper she got up and went to the temple of the Lord... and there she simply began pouring her heart out to God: **"Lord, look at my pain... and remember me. Please... don't forget me. Give me a child and I'll even give him back to you.... Please, God."**

She wasn't praying to be heard by others. In fact, she wasn't even praying this out loud. She's muttering to herself with tears streaming down her cheeks. There wasn't anything special about her prayer really except that it was gut-wrenchingly honest.

The priest looked over and noticed her in the corner... her lips mumbling with no sound coming out, mascara smeared all around her blood-shot eyes... and assumed she must be drunk. And so he went over to chastise her. **"How long will you act like a drunk in the Lord's house? Sober up!"** he said.

"No... I'm just a very sad woman." she said. **"I haven't even had a drink. I'm just been pouring my heart out to the Lord."**

"Oh," the priest said a little awkwardly. **"I'm sorry. Then go in peace, and may God give you what you asked."** as he goes and sticks his head in the sand.

And that's what happened. She conceived. And had a son and named him Samuel... and he became a great prophet in the land ...walking intimately with God... guiding the people, and eventually anointing Saul and then David king of Israel.

But it's not the ending that makes Hannah's prayer so beautiful. It's the raw honest-simplicity of her prayer. **"Please Lord, look on my pain. Remember me."** We hear those same simple words echoing centuries later in the mouth of a thief, hanging on a cross, **"Jesus, remember me..."** and Jesus hears his prayer.

When you start paying attention to the prayers in the gospels, it seems Jesus always responds most fully to the prayers that are the most simple and honest.

"Lord, have mercy on me" a blind man cries from the side of the road. And he receives his sight.⁴

⁴ Luke 18:38-43

“Lord, don’t you care we’re drowning here?” the disciples shout at him and the storm is calmed.⁵

In fact, it seems the only prayers that Jesus has no patience for are the showy prayers of the religious leaders. **“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites,”** he says. **“They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them... And when you pray, don’t pour out a flood of empty words...”**⁶

Just pray as simply as you can. The intention of the heart, is what matters here, not the performance of your words. The honesty of your presence is what counts, not what others think of you.

Philip Yancy writes, **“I am convinced the main requirement in prayer is honesty, approaching God, ‘just as we are.’....Apart from the requirement that we be authentic before God, there is no prescribed way to pray.”**⁷

Of course, developing intimacy with God takes time. In a lot of ways, the long road of learning to pray intimately and honestly with God is a lot like the long road of any intimate relationship. It might start out like a first date... where there is a kind of awkwardness. You’re trying... but you don’t know how to get started. So just like a Middle Schooler at a dance... all insecure... you try some pre-rehearsed conversation starters. **“God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food?”**

After awhile, though, that awkwardness fades and there is growing excitement about connecting, like two love birds that can’t stop telling each other about every detail... texting and tweeting, full of words... words and more words.

It’s the point where you begin to share with God all the details of your life, and it’s a good point to arrive at along the way. You’re learning to **“Take it to the Lord in prayer...”** as the old hymn goes.

But after awhile, the chatting slows down... because you have to go a little deeper and learn to listen a bit better. No relationship can be a one-way monologue. And so, over time, you become more open to the other. And you’re changed in the listening. You take on their traits... some phrase... some idiosyncrasy of theirs, because you’re listening and receiving some of who they are.

That’s what takes place in Lectio Divina...
in meditation and listening prayers.

Well, eventually these two lovebirds grow old together... and now they sit on the front porch early in the morning, drinking their coffee, watching the sunrise. Not a word is said between them, but not because they’ve grown distant. Not a word is said because

⁵ Mark 4:38-39

⁶ Matthew 6:5, 7

⁷ Yancy, 185, 190.

nothing needs to be said. There is a richness in the silence. In the presence of one another they are completely and wholly themselves, known and loved.

All that matters is the presence of the other...

the state of simply being...

of union.

There is wholeness here.

All is held, and know, and healed, and shared in love.

That's where keeping company with God eventually takes us... if we'll keep at it. But it doesn't just happen on it's own.

Mother Teresa said that if you're wondering how to pray, then you should start **"By praying.... If you want to learn to pray better, then you have to pray more."**⁸ she said.

So, if you're spiritual life has been feeling a little bloated lately, then maybe it's time to stop simply thinking about prayer, and start again.

"Pray without ceasing," Paul says in 1 Thessalonians.

Pray even if you don't feel like it,

even if you don't think you know how.

Pray with words.

Pray with silence.

Pray as honestly as you can.

Pray... and come to know the blessed gift
of keeping company with God.

Amen.

Reflection:

He said to his disciples, "Come away with me to a quiet place all by yourselves and rest." ~Mark 6:31

⁸ Yancy, 161.