

Prayer

“LORD, teach us to pray!”

“Take with you words...”

It's God's plea to his people in Hosea 14:2
It is a summons to prayer.
It is a call to turn to the Lord and seek renewed friendship.
And the prayer it invites us to embrace can seem just as
foreign as the Hebrew script in which the invitation was
originally spoken.

What is prayer? Why prayer? And how do we pray? While
we will never resolve all of the mysteries surrounding
prayer, hopefully this much will be clear: prayer is the
passionate interaction of your heart with the heart of God
— and he is hungry for that. In fact he hungers for that
interaction far more than do we!

To help lay a crucial backdrop for all of prayer, I would
really encourage you to read the following excerpts from Richard Foster's book **Prayer:
Finding the Heart's True Home**.

COMING HOME: An Invitation To PRAYER

True, whole prayer is nothing but love. – *St. Augustine*

God has graciously allowed me to catch a glimpse into his heart, and I want to share with you
what I have seen. Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance
and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have
forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our
presence.

He is inviting you – and me – to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for
which were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take
us in. For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a
country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And he
welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and openness,
home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation.

We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on
old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where clatter and
batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to
our heart's delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and

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stretch...and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity where we can be co-laborers with him, working together to determine the outcome of events. He invites us into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found and where we can be vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy where we know and are known to the fullest.

The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer. Perhaps you have never prayed before except in anguish or terror. It may be that the only time the Divine Name has been on your lips has been in angry expletives. Never mind...the Father's heart is open wide – and you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps you do not believe in prayer. You may have tried to pray and were profoundly disappointed...and disillusioned. You seem to have little faith or none. It does not matter. The Father's heart is open wide – you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps you are bruised and broken by the pressures of life. Others have wronged you, and you feel scarred for life. You have old, painful memories that have never been healed. You avoid prayer because you feel too distant, too unworthy, too defiled. Do not despair. The Father's heart is open wide – you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps you have prayed for many years, but the words have grown brittle and cold. Little ever happens anymore. God seems remote and inaccessible. Listen to me. The Father's heart is open wide – you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps prayer is the delight of your life. You have lived in the divine milieu for a long time and can attest to its goodness. But you long for more: more power, more love, more of God in your life. Believe me. The Father's heart is open wide – you too are welcome to come higher up and deeper in.

If the key is prayer, the door is Jesus Christ. How good of God to provide us a way into his heart. He knows that we are stiff-necked and hard-hearted, so he has provided a means of entrance. Jesus, the Christ, lived a perfect life, died in our place, and rose victoriously over all the dark powers so that we might live through him. This is wonderfully good news. No longer do we have to stand outside, barred from nearness to God by our rebellion. We may now enter through the door of God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ.

Prayer is an invitation to explore the "many-splendored" heart of God. Our need is not so much for definitions *of* prayer or terminology *for* prayer or arguments *about* prayer, though all of these have their place. What we need is a love relationship: an enduring, continuing, growing love relationship with the great God of the universe. Love is the syntax of prayer. To be effective pray-ers, we need to be effective lovers. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Samuel Coleridge declares, "He prayeth well that loveth well."

One day a friend of mine was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The child was in a particularly cantankerous mood, fussing and fuming. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son, but nothing seemed to help. The child simply would not obey. Then, under some special inspiration, the father scooped up his son and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet, as best he could, this father began sharing his heart. "I love you," he sang. "I'm so glad you're my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh." On they went from one store to the next. Quietly the father continued singing off key and making up words that did not rhyme. The child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his son into the carseat, the child lifted his head and said simply, "Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!"

Prayer is a little like that. With simplicity of heart we allow ourselves to be gathered up into the arms of the Father and let him sing his love song over us.

Dear God, I am so grateful for your invitation to enter your heart of love. As best I can, I come in. Thank you for receiving me. Amen.

The Simple Prayer of Three Hermits

Leo Tolstoy tells the story of three hermits who lived on an island. Their prayer of intimacy and love was simple like they were simple: “We are three; you are three; have mercy on us. Amen.”

Miracles sometimes happened when they prayed in this way.

The bishop, however, hearing about the hermits, decided that they needed guidance in proper prayer, and so he went to their small island. After instructing the monks, the bishop set sail for the mainland, pleased to have enlightened the souls of such simple men.

Suddenly, off the stern of the ship he saw a huge ball of light skimming across the ocean. It got closer and closer until he could see that it was the three hermits running on top of the water. Once on board the ship they said to the bishop, “We are so sorry, but we have forgotten some of your teaching. Would you please instruct us again?”

The bishop shook his head and replied meekly, “Forget everything I have taught you and continue to pray in your old way.”

If the truth reflected in these two excerpts can find good soil in our hearts and send down some deep roots, we will have rich, prayerful communion with God indeed! There is a simplicity and an intimacy in prayer that is wondrous to behold. We can bring so much of guilt and anguished expectations to prayer, trying so desperately to get the right combination to effective prayer, and yet prayer is ultimately more about relaxing and resting in your Abba’s arms and allowing him to sing his song over you, than it is a job interview or a typical interaction you might have with a bank teller or an employee at the DMV. Now, to be sure, not all prayer is quiet and serene — at times it can be more like the shouting and clamor you hear on Wallstreet. But at its root, prayer remains an intimate connection, a passionate embrace that sometimes requires no words at all.