



The Paradox of Prayer

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Why do we avoid that which we so desperately need?

"Find my keys, Jesus," Luis prayed. He had been a Christian for only a week—not much time to formulate a theology of prayer. He retraced his steps. The keys were not there.

What was he to do now? "Jesus, please help me find my keys," he continued praying. Days went by. "Jesus, please help someone find my keys and return them to me."

Instead of confident presumption, the tone of Luis's prayers increasingly took on an air of humility. Instead of a focus on his needs and agenda, he developed an openness to God's intervention, on His terms.

By the time someone found and returned his keys a week later, Luis had come to realize that prayer was much more than an intercom system at a fast food drive-in. Besides marshaling the help of a compassionate God, prayer is a means God uses to change us.

When I ask people about the primary influences that alter their actions and shape their lives, they rarely mention personal prayer. Maybe this is because we generally think of prayer as something that influences external events. But Scripture and the prayer warriors among us testify to the power of prayer to bring internal growth.

Jesus certainly felt the need of His Father's influence. Many have used [Mark 1:35](#) to illustrate Jesus' commitment to prayer. After an extremely hard day and night of teaching, healing, and exorcising demons, He got up **"very early in the morning, while it was still dark, . . . left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."**

But the thing that fascinates me as much as Jesus' commitment to prayer in this situation is the *influence* that particular prayer time had on His life.

Its impact becomes apparent when Peter and the other disciples finally find Jesus. They tell Him, **"Everyone is looking for you!" (Mark 1:37)**. And what does Jesus say—"Well then, let's go for it"? No, He says, **"Let us go somewhere else."** In effect He tells Peter, **"I can't be controlled by other people's agendas. I am about My Father's priorities."**

And what were His Father's priorities? [Mark 1:38](#): **"Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come"** (emphasis added).

People wanted Jesus-the-miracle worker. And what a temptation for Him—steady work, adoring fans, little or no flak, a ready outlet for compassion, a lot of excitement—not things normally associated with the more mundane task of preaching.

But what gave Jesus the strength to resist the agenda of the crowd and the temptation to spend His time on urgent pressures rather than important priorities? Simply put, it was the time He had spent alone with His Father.

Reflecting on the influence of such time with the Father, **John White** writes in *The Race*:

"We are influenced by the people we associate with. The more powerful or the more distinctive the characters of people we rub shoulders with, the more time we spend with them, the greater the likelihood of change. It follows that if we spend time daily in the company of our Creator God, a profound impact will be made on our existence . . . Our values alter once we start meeting regularly with God. Some things that once seemed important shrivel and lose their fascination, while others swell in significance . . . We will see people differently. We will pity people we once feared; eschew people we once cultivated; pray for people who once enraged us."

Jesus knew that private time with the Father made the difference between going along with the flow or controlling the flow. Whether it was sorting out how to use His time, choosing His disciples, or committing Himself to endure the crucifixion, a realignment of perspective was in order. And if Jesus needed the course of His life shaped through the practice of prayer, how can we do without such influence?

Here we confront the paradox of prayer. We desperately need it and yet we desperately avoid it. Why?

MORE WITH LESS

Our culture does not support a

pace of life that naturally cultivates prayer. Our tempo is more often set by McDonald's and Macintosh. And while God listens to our hurried McPrayers, they will do little for us in terms of opening our ears to hear Him or inviting the kind of profound impact of which John White speaks.

Jesus did not live in a fast-paced culture like ours, but He faced another, more significant time issue: three short years to complete the story of salvation. Thirty-six months of ministry meant that a lot of people would go unhealed, untaught, and undisciplined. But at the end of His life Jesus could still declare, "**It is finished.**" He had not accomplished all He could have; but He accomplished all He needed to. Discerning His priorities within the quiet confines of communion with His Father made that crucial difference.

Jesus' dedication to prayer came partly from realizing that prayer gave Him *more* time, not less. It helped crystallize the important priorities and dissipate the merely urgent ones. While we may never fully understand how prayer affects God or how it adds power to the outworking of His intentions, we do know that the *practice* of prayer helps us.

DOING WHAT DOESN'T COME NATURALLY

Such alteration doesn't happen overnight. And that brings us to another reason behind our lack of prayer. It is hard work. You would not think prayer would be difficult—didn't God create people for fellowship with Him? Prayer should involve a perfectly *natural* link of intimate communication, shouldn't it? And sometimes, to be sure, praying does bring the kind of immediacy that comes through in a crystal-clear

phone call.

But the breach of fellowship initiated in the Garden of Eden has brought the curse of frustrating toil to more than just our vocational pursuits. Prayer requires us to concentrate, to stretch our attention span and yet not see much immediate feedback. This is exhausting work—mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

I find very few who express a natural inclination for prayer. For most of us, it can be harder work than almost anything else we do. Realizing this has actually been one of the best discoveries of my Christian life.

My avoidance of prayer is similar to my avoidance of any hard work. By nature I am inclined to take the path of least resistance. We all are. But just as it is foolish to think we can obtain a quality education without effort, or excellence without discipline, or wisdom without perseverance, or a good relationship without investing time, so we will not be successful at prayer without paying a price. The greatest goals demand the greatest efforts. So where do we start?

HABIT FORMING PRAYER

Let's face it, a private time of prayer—and its complementary discipline of personal Bible study—will be more likely to occur if we plan it. I recommend scheduling prayer after something you do regularly.

Because I find disciplined prayer more difficult than a hard workout, I'm more likely to skip prayer than to skip swimming. So I put the activity

I'm most likely to complete into my schedule and let the automatic routine carry me through my prayer time. Others may use an activity they really enjoy as a reward after they've completed a time of prayer. Not that prayer is punishment—I'm just realistic about human weaknesses!

Include times to meet for prayer with other Christians in your schedule. Often I find corporate prayer will "jump start" my own prayer life. But whether it's personal, one-to-one, or group prayer, the key is putting it on the calendar. You will be most likely to pray if it's a part of your schedule.

PRAY "BIG"

Whenever you pray, work on "praying big." The refreshing development of conversational prayer that came in with the "Jesus movement" of the early seventies was built on a desire for more intimacy with God. People were tired of asking God to "bless all the missionaries" and wanted to get specific. But such intimacy can immerse us in a pattern of detailed prayer that limits us to the simple concerns of making it through the day.

Sometimes when praying it is better *not* to concentrate on specific requests. Instead, allow a passage of Scripture or a hymn to focus your attention on larger concerns. Try using **Acts 1:8** as a model for *big prayer*. On successive days of the week pray for your "Jerusalem" (your neighborhood and work situations), "Judea" (your city and state), "Samaria" (the nation), and "the ends of the earth" (the world).

Paul's prayers in **Ephes 1:17-19** and **Ephes 3:14-21** provide another helpful model in praying big without losing a sense of intimacy. He asks

God that Christians at Ephesus "may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge" (**Ephes. 3:18-19**). Wouldn't you love to have mends praying those kinds of prayers for you?

PRAY THE PSALMS

I use the psalms in my attempt to "pray big." As I read slowly through a psalm, I pray its words at the same time. The psalm acts as my meditation guide merging Scripture, my thoughts, and prayer together. Such prayer greatly expands my sense of God's presence and helps immerse me in His larger concerns.

The psalms have been the prayer book of the Church for centuries. They are aptly termed by one Church father as the *gymnasium of prayer*. Praying the psalms can become a focused workout, increasing our muscles of faith for spiritual warfare.

KEEP IT FRESH

Once you have built a healthy habit of scheduled prayer, what do you do when boredom sets in? When you feel like your prayer life needs a major overhaul, it may be helpful to find a prayer partner to encourage you. Together you could formulate a prayer plan. Consider beginning with the psalms or other Scripture as a guide to "big prayer."

Or, try implementing some small changes. I have found that walking while I pray helps to keep me fresh and alert. Try praying out loud and raising your hands. Add singing, a prayer list, or a journal. Pray over ideas you have read about in Christian literature. Use the requests

in the Lord's Prayer on subsequent days as a stimulus for prayer.

Whatever you do, realize *God wants the opportunity of these private prayer moments to shape you*. As God's change agents in this world we must first be changed, and prayer is a primary means the Lord uses in that process. Prayer can give us new direction, new motivation, new attitudes, new values. Nothing less is fitting for new creatures in Christ.



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