

WHEN YOU CAN'T PRAY*

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Although prayer is the route to the inner way, the treasure in the field, many Christians find that they cannot pray.

When frustrated in prayer, feelings of anger, inadequacy or impotence arise in our hearts.

Since we Christians function on the premise that God is continually seeking us, it is not easy to understand the frustration that arises when we can't pray. If God seeks us, and we try to seek God, what happens to frustrate the meeting? What goes wrong when we can't pray?

Let us this morning delineate some of the obstacles to prayer. By recognizing the obstacles, we will become aware of our difficulties with prayer.

If we recognize the obstacles, we will not project our frustration and failure into anger and disbelief.

We may be able to assume responsibility for the obstacles and help to remove them.

If I can identify the internal obstacles to prayer, I'll

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most likely be able to grow in the life of prayer.

"Prayer is our response when we have found ourselves possessed and sought by God on some occasion in our lives" (p. 182).

William Blake's words, "We are put on earth for a little space that we may learn to bear the beams of love," make it evident that we are invited to respond to God. But for us it is not easy to be open to these beams of love. Prayer "is concerned with the changes necessary in order for us to become less resistant and less afraid of the beams of love."

Wm. Blake

Prayer is

"This quiet openness to change is related to the Christian tradition of the 'prayer of the heart'" (p. 183). Thomas Merton describes this quiet opening, this prayer of the heart, as "a way of keeping oneself in the presence of God and of reality, rooted in one's inner truth."

Merton

According to this line of thinking, in order to bear the beams of love, I must be rooted in my inner truth. Without self-knowledge, openness to God is impossible. I must be willing to face the negative, as well as the positive, elements that I find within myself.

rooted in my inner truth.

The obstacles to prayer revolve around failure in self-knowledge and the fear and resistance I often produce to obscure my inner depth.

The beams of love, of which we are speaking, bear witness to the priority and initiative of God. God creates.

Beams of love - priority & initiative of God

God sustains. God redeems. In Jesus Christ He has given us the depth of his love: "For God so loved the world--you and me and all mankind--that he has given his Only-Begotten Son."

The priority of God's love encourages me to face my resistance and frustration with hope. In a manner beyond my comprehension, God is working at depths that I cannot reach.

The journey into my heart is a double search. On the one hand, God searches for me. On the other, I thirst and search for God. When I pray, I seek God, knowing that God seeks and loves me.

When I pray, I collaborate with "the creative God who calls me to become a pilgrim in the land of my interior depth."

Yet, as I have said, there are obstacles that impede the life of prayer. These obstacles continuously frustrate my relationship to God. Let us take a look at some of these obstacles.

1. The first obstacle to prayer is our woundedness.

How many of us feel rejected, unwanted, unloved? Looking back on your life journey, can you recall those moments when you were deeply hurt by being rejected by your father, mother, brother, or some other person? Do you believe that you have not been loved sufficiently in the past? These painful experiences of the past make it impossible for us to accept the vulnerability that love demands. As someone has

said: "Because our need to be loved and to give love is so deep and central, to be denied this makes us angry beyond the conscious knowing, and an angry person is tempted consciously or unconsciously to destroy, to kill, and often does. Most people in the world are deeply angry" (Gordon Cosby, "The Invisible World," Faith at Work, March, 1976, p. 6).

Are you a wounded person, deeply angry inside? If you harbor in your heart these powerful negative feelings, you will not be able to commune with God. You may believe in God's grace. You may be intentionally open to his love. But your hurt and your anger will make it impossible for you to pay attention to God and to experience his healing presence.

What can you and I do to deal with our woundedness and our anger?

Although I feel rejected, there are still people who care about me, who enjoy me and who love me. I need to trust this care and love. I must accept the fact that I need other people. By reaching out to others, in spite of my woundedness, I will find new friends and I'll deepen my trust. This reaching out may encompass my spouse, an old friend, the minister, a teacher, or some other person.

But it is not enough to allow others to love me. I need to love myself, especially the wounded parts. If deep inside myself I carry a grudge and I feel that my father or mother, or brother or sister, or some other person wounded me deeply,

I have to accept that part of me, acknowledge it, and let it be part of myself. Accepting my woundedness is not an easy matter. But when I do recognize it, I can be rooted in my inner truth. Then I'll be able to live more fully in the presence of God as reality.

2. The second obstacle to prayer is fear of darkness in ourselves

I will be disappointed in prayer if I do not recognize the darkness in myself. On encountering darkness in myself, I may try to deny its existence and get distracted with other things. But true prayer will not allow me to deny my darkness nor to be seduced by distractions. If I want to learn to pray, I must face my darkness.

What do I mean by encountering darkness in myself? I mean meeting

- deep anger,
- emptiness,
- loneliness,
- guilt,
- fear,
- excessive pride,
- a sense of failure to live up to our ideals,
- a recognition of helplessness before some undesirable desire or habit,
- a recognition of not truly living,
- a sense of living a lie,
- attachment to possessions.

The list could be continued. If I refuse to encounter these aspects of my personality, there will always be a gray world within me, in which God is distant.

"Encounter with darkness in <myself> is an essential

element of true prayer. It is part of the movement toward true light." The important thing is to acknowledge my dark side and trust in God. He is already working in me, calling me to wholeness. When I acknowledge my darkness and take it to God, it will lose its power over me. "To avoid darkness is to do so at the price of living in shallowness and unreality" (p. 186).

Often we have idealized images of ourselves. This self-image we carefully nurture. But it is a false image that must be broken down. It is an idol. My true image has a dark side.

When I acknowledge the darkness before God, one of the obstacles to prayer will be removed.

3. The third obstacle to prayer is our need to achieve.

Ours is a society of achievers. We earn our identity and self-esteem by achieving. We are constantly being judged by what we do and not by what we are. Or more clearly, what we do determines who we are.

A person who understands him/herself as an achiever will consider prayer another achievement. This attitude will bring disappointment, since "a great deal of achievement in our culture depends on willful manipulation of life by our conscious selves, whereas prayer involves an open availability to life and a desire not to do our ego-will, but the will of God" (p. 186).

Prayer cannot be approached with the same attitude as we approach the rest of life. Our acquired manipulative skills and our desire to be successful impede our openness to God and to reality. In our experience we discover that our aggressiveness and desire to control are constantly humiliated. When we are faced with this frustration, we are forced to recognize that what matters most in life is not at the service of our achieving devices. Human beings cannot ultimately be manipulated. And most important of all, God cannot be manipulated to serve our ends.

When it comes to prayer, the achiever in us must be put to death. There are other qualities of our humanity that must emerge, if we are to be more receptive to God's love:

- learning to listen,
- to hear, to be passive and receptive,
- to wait and be patient,
- to trust intuition.

Psychologists tell us that these are the qualities most often associated with the feminine side of our personality. "It takes a long time for both male and female achievers to learn and to trust these qualities of our being. Yet it is through the receptive feminine side of life that we can learn to pray and to know God" (p. 187).

It is not easy to recognize the importance of the feminine side of our personality. It often takes a serious crisis in our lives, when we are totally helpless and at a

loss, to acknowledge this side of our being. These crises may be:

- serious illness,
- admission of alcoholism,
- death of a loved one,
- loss of work,
- the dissolution of an important intimate relationship.

The feminine qualities of our personality can be nourished in different ways:

- by meditative listening to Scripture we learn to let Scripture address us personally;
- by listening to dreams, which come to us from another world beyond our control;
- by being attentive to the beauty of the created universe, nature can become a door to the Creator of nature.

Also, "In the give and take of friendship or in marriage we slowly learn to let go of our willful ordering of the other person's life and gradually accept the uniqueness and otherness of the friend or spouse with their mixture of strength and weakness; beauty and ugliness" (p. 187).

In being attentive and open to the Scriptures, to our dreams, to the world of nature and to human relations, we can ultimately become attentive and open to God. Thus we will enter the world of true prayer.

4. A fourth obstacle to prayer is lack of patience.

Carl G. Jung, the great Swiss psychiatrist and psychologist, used to say: "Hurry is not of the devil. Hurry is the

devil itself." We want things in a hurry. We are very impatient. In Puerto Rico people are always in a hurry. We want things done our way and quickly.

Nothing can be more detrimental to prayer than our unwillingness to wait and be patient. This does not mean that we need to be patient with all situations in life. When the water or the telephone or electricity are cut off, we want fast action. "But in relation to prayer, advice to be patient is an honest recognition that the transformation of our person by grace toward our wholeness is a slow process. The education and training of our person to be available to God's love is slow. Even the sudden gifts of moments of grace do not preclude the slow, gradual process of sanctification ... There are no short cuts or tricks in the life of prayer" (p. 189).

5. A fifth obstacle to prayer is lack of obedience in small things.

In prayer we may be on the lookout for major insights or profound illumination or a clear call to an exciting, life-transforming project. These experiences may be treasured; however, such desires are often more a need of the ego than a readiness to allow such experiences to transform and shape our lives.

"It is absurd to aspire to some grand revelation of God's will, while we are refusing to attend to this or that

small beginning of revelation that is already unmistakably before us" (John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1956). It may be something telling me that I am not using my money as I should--not being a good steward. Or a recurrent doubt about some habitual practice. Or an uncomfortable feeling about a certain indulgence I have been allowing myself.

If we are disobedient in little things, we will be disappointed in prayer.

6. And finally, a sixth obstacle to prayer is lack of gratitude

We may be disappointed in prayer if we fail to celebrate and be grateful for the grace and gifts and strength that we receive in our daily lives and in prayer.

Sometimes we focus on our struggles and on our suffering and forget gratitude.

The best way to enter prayer is through gratitude. The apostle Paul invites us to be thankful in all things.

Conclusion

Prayer is an important matter in the life of a Christian. Jesus was a man of prayer. Right now Jesus Christ intercedes for us in heaven, according to Paul: "Jesus Christ ...died for us; yes, was raised from the dead and is at the right hand of God interceding for us" (Rom 8:34). Also the Spirit prays for us: "And he who searches the hearts of men

knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom 8:26).

Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "Pray without ceasing" (5:17) and to the Philippians: "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

Were you aware that prayer is that central to the New Testament? This is a challenge to you and me.

I invite you to take a look at your prayer life. Do you really pray? Do you find obstacles when you pray? What are those obstacles? If you want to begin to pray, you must recognize those obstacles, repent and be cleansed.

God is seeking you. Are you willing to respond? If you really want to grow in your faith, prayer is a must.

Prayer means the transformation of our personality into the likeness of Christ. Are you willing to walk this path?

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I invite you to pray.