

Learning to Pray

by Samuel Chadwick

True prayer is a personal, intimate, and original relationship with God, which can be learned through discipline and training.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:15, Luke 11:1, Acts 9:11, Colossians 4:2, James 5:16

Topics: "Effective Prayer", "Spiritual Discipline"

Description

Samuel Chadwick delves into the essence of prayer, emphasizing the personal, intimate, and original nature of true prayer that prevails. He explores how prayer is learned through the act of praying, not through philosophical reasoning, and highlights the importance of receptivity alongside expression in prayer. Chadwick discusses the power of disciplined prayer, drawing examples from biblical figures like Elijah and Saul of Tarsus, and emphasizes that prayer is measured by intensity rather than quantity or routine. He encourages believers to dedicate time daily for prayer, stressing the significance of training in prayer to develop a praying spirit and draw closer to God.

Transcript

Can prayer be learned? Is it not of the very soul of prayer that it shall be in the freedom of the Spirit? John the Baptist gave his disciples a form of prayer, and the disciples of Jesus asked to be taught to pray. There were not many things they asked Him to do for them, and when they did, they were usually wrong. Would He have given them a form of prayer if they had not asked Him? Why did they ask? His own praying awoke within them a desire to be able to pray, and when they wanted to pray they found they did not know how. They felt the need of some ordered form by which they could speak out of their heart to God. They quoted John. There are still disciples who quote John the Baptist to Jesus. Forms are easier than a creative spirit. Prayers counted on a rosary are easier than the prayers of a soul poured out in unrestrained speech to God. The Prayer Book helps the inarticulate to expression. Such praying may be perfectly sincere, and the devout may find in provided prayers a real help to devotion, and it may be that such praying may need to be learned at the feet of instructors. Indeed, that is the kind of prayer that needs to be learned. The rosary prayers are recited, and the Free Churchman seldom knows his way through Morning or Evening Prayers in the Prayer Book. All praying begins with forms of prayer. There is hardly a soul but remembers the simple, earnest prayers repeated at the mother's knee with reverent wonder and joy.

Personality In Prayer

It is not other people's prayers that make the man of prayer. All true prayer, the prayer that prevails, is personal, intimate and original. Hannah protested that she had poured out her soul to God. That is prayer, and yet it is not the whole of prayer. Receptivity is as real a part of prayer as expression. Saul of Tarsus had been a praying man from his youth, but he never really prayed till he met the risen Lord on the Damascus road. From the heavenward side the whole change that had been wrought was summed up in the words, "Behold, he prayeth."

The secret of Elijah's power in prayer was that he "prayed in his prayer." That is the translation given in the margin of the Authorized Version. He "prayed earnestly" is given in the text, and "fervently" in the Revised Version, with the note in the margin that says the Greek literally is, "with prayer." He prayed with prayer; he prayed in his prayer. That is to say, he really prayed his prayers. He did not say prayers; he prayed in praying. His whole personality was in his supplication. He really wanted what he asked, and fervently meant what he said. Can that kind of prayer be taught?

It is the prayer that prevails. Formal routine of temple-service and the regular reading of words of second-hand inspiration and no understanding are neither acceptable to God nor profitable to man. They are vain repetitions. There is much praying that avails nothing, so far as we can judge. During the baccarat scandal, W. E. Stead computed the number and value of the prayers offered every day in the Anglican Church for the Prince of Wales, and the computation of value was not in proportion to their number. He was probably wrong, for prayer is not accounted in terms of arithmetic. The real problem is not there. Prayers are measured neither by time nor by number, but by intensity. There are prayers that are impassioned and there is no answer, and there are things for which we know we ought to pray in an agony of prayer, and there is no power to pray. We do not know how to pray.

Prayer Learned By Praying

There is no way to learn to pray but by praying. No reasoned philosophy of prayer ever taught a soul to pray. The subject is beset with problems, but there are no problems of prayer to the man who prays. They are all met in the fact of answered prayer and the joy of fellowship with God. We know not what we should pray for as we ought, and if prayer waits for understanding, it will never begin. We live by faith. We walk by faith. Edison wrote in 1921: "We don't know the millionth part of one per cent about anything. We don't know what water is. We don't know what light is. We don't know what gravitation is. We don't know what enables us to keep on our feet when we stand up. We don't know what electricity is. We don't know what heat is. We don't know anything about magnetism. We have a lot of hypotheses about these things, but that is all. But we do not let our ignorance about all these things deprive us of their use." We discover by using. We learn by practice. Though a man should have all knowledge about prayer, and though he understand all mysteries about prayer, unless he prays he will never learn to pray.

There have been souls that were mighty in prayer, and they learned to pray. There was a period in their lives when they were as others in the matter of prayer, but they became mighty with God and prevailed. In every instance there was a crisis of grace, but it was in the discipline of grace that they discovered the secret of power. They were known as men of God, because they were men of prayer. Some of them were renamed, like Jacob and Simon and Saul. They were called "Praying John," "Praying Mary," "Praying Bramwell," and "Praying Hyde." Our Methodist fathers were mighty in prayer. They saved England by prayer. They shook the gates of hell by prayer. They opened the windows of heaven by prayer. How did they learn to pray? They learned to pray by being much in prayer. They did not talk about prayer; they prayed. They did not argue about prayer; they prayed.

Trained In Prayer

Prayer touches infinite extremes. It is so simple that a little child can pray, and it is so profound that none but a child-heart can pray. Montgomery's hymn has immortalized its profound simplicity:

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,

Uttered or unexpressed,

The motion of a hidden fire

That trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the simplest form of speech

That infant lips can try;

Prayer the sublimest strains that reach

The Majesty on high.

That is gloriously true. A cry brings God. A cry is mightier than the polished phrase. The Pharisee prayed within himself. His prayers revolved on ruts of vanity in his own mind and heart. The publican cried and was heard. It is not of emergency exits of the soul we are thinking, but the sustained habit and experience of the man of prayer. Such prayer comes by training, and there is no discipline so exacting. Coleridge says of such praying that it is the very highest energy of which the human heart is capable, and it calls for the total concentration of all the faculties. The great mass of worldly men and learned men he pronounced incapable of prayer. To pray as God would have us pray is the greatest achievement on earth.

Such a life of prayer costs. It takes time. Hurried prayers and muttered litanies can never produce souls mighty in prayer. To become skilled in art and mechanism, learners give hours regularly every day that they may become proficient. Our Lord rose before daybreak that He might pray, and not infrequently He spent all night in prayer. All praying saints have spent hours every day in prayer. One is afraid to quote examples. In these days there is no time to pray; but without time, and a lot of it, we shall never learn to pray. It ought to be possible to give God one hour out of twenty-four all to Himself. Anyway, let us make a start in the discipline of training in prayer by setting apart a fixed time every day for the exercise of prayer. We must seriously set our hearts to learn how to pray. "To pray with all your heart and strength, with the reason and the will, to believe vividly that God will listen to your voice through Christ, and verily do the thing He pleaseth thereupon -- this is the last, the greatest achievement of the Christian's warfare upon earth." Teach us to pray, O Lord, we beseech thee.

The Praying Spirit breathe,

The watching power impart,

From all entanglements beneath,

Call off my anxious heart.

My feeble mind sustain,

By worldly thoughts oppressed,
Appear, and bid me turn again
To my eternal rest.

When you feel the strain of discipline remember these words:

Thou art oft most present, Lord,
In weak, distracted prayer;
A sinner out of heart with self,
Most often finds thee there.
For prayer that humbles, sets the soul
From all delusions free,
And teaches it how utterly
Dear Lord, it hangs on thee.

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