***SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: PRAYER***

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Texts: Philippians 1:3-11 and Matthew 6:5-13

William White was a Presbyterian minister who served churches in Charlottesville, Lexington, and other parts of Virginia in the 19th century. His autobiography, assembled by his son from many of Dr. White’s writings, describes church life in places not far from where we gather this day. In the book he describes an experience as a student at Hampden-Sydney College. There Dr. White heard a lecture by Dr. Moses Hoge in which Dr. Hoge spoke of our lives being weighed in the balances and found wanting. So convicted was he by Dr. Hoge’s words that immediately after the service Dr. White went to the forest beyond the College, “*and there,*” he writes, “*in the night and dark and silent woods, I had the first clear conception of the difference between saying prayers and praying. The first I was familiarized to in childhood, the latter I had never attempted nor understood*.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

How about you? Have you found such a difference between saying prayers and praying, or are they, in your mind and experience, one and the same? Which do you do when you bow your head and bend your knees – say your prayers or pray? For, do not think that saying prayers is the sole province of children and praying the practice of adults. There are children who pray and adults who say their prayers and have not yet found any distinction. When we offered our prayer of confession a few moments ago were you praying or saying prayers? When you bow your head, if you bow your head, to offer a few words of thanks before digging into the pot roast or fried chicken or par-boiled tofu do you pray or merely recite familiar words? Is “now I lay me down to sleep” your prayer or merely a mantra you repeat as your head hits the pillow? Do you pray when you pray, if you pray, and if so, what do you say?

The difference between saying prayers and praying is the difference between speaking from your lips and speaking from your heart; it is the difference between a lecture and a conversation. Saying prayers has little to do with the form of the prayer and everything to do with the object of the prayer and the heart of the pray-er. It goes beyond appearance, beyond form, beyond substance, to intention and intentionality and integrity. God wants not just the prayers of our lips, but the prayers of our hearts and those sighs too deep for words that God understands even if we don’t. Prayer is conversation with God, and God is a ready and willing partner, always more ready to hear than we are to pray.

Jesus says that when you pray you should really pray. He suggests that you go into your room and shut the door and pray in private instead of standing on the street corner for all to see. He warns us about those folks who pray to be seen and heard by others, instead of praying to be heard by God. You know these people! A few years ago I attended a football game at Clemson University. Before the Clemson team came rushing down the hill onto the field (which was quite a sight, marred only by a player who tripped, tumbled to the bottom of the hill and broke an ankle before the game had even started), but before that, there was a lengthy pre-game ceremony that included *God Bless America*, *The* *Star-Spangled Banner*, the *Pledge of Allegiance*, and seemingly the *Gettysburg Address*, *Declaration of Independence* and several portions of the *Magna Carta*, before concluding with a prayer. On that particular Saturday the designated pray-er offered something like this:

*O Divine Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, and Father of us all who hath created the shining orb and boundless blue sky beneath which we gather this day to witness upon this green sward of verdant earth this battle between two legions of thy young servants carved from the very dust of the earth…*

It was about that point that it seemed no longer necessary to bow my head, for the designated pray-er was clearly not speaking to God. Enamored with his own eloquence he was doing verbal gymnastics to impress the crowd; he was saying words in the form of a prayer, but he wasn’t praying!

Tony Campolo tells of offering a prayer in a Baptist church, and of necessity, praying spontaneously because his fellow Baptists were always suspicious of anyone who wrote out their prayers, believing that the true pray-er should just let the spirit move him. Tony did, and as he prayed he got so caught up in his prayer that he reverted to some of his native Philadelphia street language. At the door of the church after the service he was met by a woman who said to him rather testily, “Dr. Campolo, I was very offended by the language in your prayer today.” Tony said he wanted to respond, “Lady, I wasn’t talking to you anyway!”

The difference between praying and saying prayers has much to do with the one to whom we pray. If the words are spoken to anyone other than God as the object of our prayer or for any purpose other than conversation with God – then perhaps there is little praying in the prayer, even if the prayer is that prayer Jesus taught us. But if the prayer is lifted to God from the heart – whether in spontaneous words, or carefully crafted words, or the words of another that speak better than we can ourselves, or in sighs too deep for words – then saying the prayer becomes praying. Such are the prayers of men, women, and children in Ukraine this day, pleading for God’s mercy and protection and crying out to God in the midst of their suffering: *O Lord, save us!* Such are the murmured prayers of those surviving a harrowing journey: (sigh) *Thank you, Lord!* Such are the prayers of those who recognize God’s hand in a spectacular sunset or brilliant rainbow whose prayer is simply, *Wow!* Such is the prayer of the addict or alcoholic who finds in Reinhold Niebuhr’s prayer resonance with her deepest longing:

*God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,*

*Courage to change the things which should be changed,*

*And the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other…*

It is not the words but the attitude of prayer that distinguishes the prayer of the pray-er from idle words spoken in the form of prayer.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers a model for prayer. It is noteworthy that it is a corporate prayer; it is ***Our*** *Father* and *Give* ***us*** *this day* and *Forgive* ***us***, not ***me*** and ***my***. It is a prayer for the community to share, a prayer that affirms that the God to whom we pray is God of all, parent of all, savior of all! And for what does Jesus encourage us to pray in that prayer? He begins with praise – hallowed be your name – and then turns to petitions. We ask

for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done

on earth as in heaven, which suggests faithfully, perfectly;

for bread not just for this day but for each day,

bread not just for me but for us;

for forgiveness of debts which include sins

while daring to suggest that our forgiveness of others be the measure of God’s forgiveness of us (and if that doesn’t make you nervous, it should!);

for rescue from temptation and from the possibility of temptation.

Jesus does not say this is the only way to pray, or the magical way to pray, or the preferred way to pray. He simply says, “*Pray in this way*.” And so we do. But even that holy prayer is just empty words if we recite them without thought and let the words slip off our lips absent-mindedly without a tie to our hearts. “*True prayer*,” writes Stephen Cherry, “*exposes our deepest being, our soul, and makes us vulnerable. Our prayer is an expression of our integrity*.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Think of that for a moment – your prayers express your integrity. What then do your prayers say about your integrity – not to the world, but to God? “*Prayer never stands by itself,”* writestheologian Jurgen Moltmann. *“It is always bound up with watching*.”[[3]](#endnote-3) “*In prayer we wake up to the world as it is spread out before God in all its heights and depths... Prayer to God awakens all our senses and alerts our minds and spirits. So the person who prays, lives more attentively*.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Through prayer we are to live more attentively

to the wonder of the world and our place in it,

to the needs of our neighbors and to our role in meeting those needs,

to the conflict with our enemies and possible paths to peace,

to the suffering of the world and our means of easing it,

to the love of God for all people and our call to love them too,

to the good news of Christ and our call to proclaim it in word and deed.

You can’t do that if you say your prayers without praying. So pray, really prays, and when you pray, pray from the heart, pray for everyone, for this is good in the sight of God our savior who desires that everyone – even you and me – be saved. And may Paul’s prayer for the church in Philippi be also Paul’s prayer for us:

*That your love may abound more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ, you may be pure and blameless, filled with the fruits of righteousness that come through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.* Amen and Amen

1. *William S. White, D.E. and His Times: An Autobiography*, ed. by his son, Rev. H. M. White, D.D., Presbyterian Committee of Publications: Richmond, 1891, p.27 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen Cherry, *Barefoot Prayers*, SPCK:2013, p.9 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jurgen Moltmann, *In the End – the Beginning*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2004, p.79 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Id. at p.83 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)