

Improving Conscious Contact: The Ancient Path to Prayer #7 Saying Our Prayers

If you cut your spiritual teeth in an “evangelical” or “charismatic” tradition, you may be under the impression that the biblical form of daily prayer would be something like this: take 30-60 minutes a day, preferably in morning and have your devotions. Read from the Bible, then praise & thank God using your own words, confess your sins, then pray for your needs and others.

If you are doing this and find it sustaining, please don't stop. If it ain't broke.... However if you have tried and failed to do this on a regular basis, or you do something else, but feel like this something else doesn't measure up to this standard, please be advised that this format for prayer is not outlined in the Bible per se. It is one way to pray daily, but not the only way.

So far as we know, daily prayer in New Testament era was practiced and understood more like eating: something people did at more or less regular intervals through day. Morning, noon & night, give or take. (One can live on one large meal per day, but three smaller is healthier; hypoglycemics need six meals a day.) This approach to daily prayer is called **fixed hour prayer**. (But the concept of time when the practice began was more fluid than digital, so don't over interpret the "fix" part of fixed hour prayer.)

That was the **baseline** for daily prayer, so far we know. It was also closer to **reason** people prayed: like **eating helps you get through the day**, praying like this helped people get through the day. Simple as that.

Phyllis Tickle, in her excellent introduction to the practice in *The Divine Hours*, points out the biblical background of fixed hour prayer. Daniel, in Babylon, prayed three times a day facing Jerusalem (Daniel 6:10) The psalmist refers to praising seven times a day (Ps. 119:164). Early disciples are shown at prayer at fixed hours: 9 am in the upper room (Acts 2: 1, 15); Peter on roof for his Noon prayers (Acts 10:9); Peter & John on way to temple for 3pm prayers (Acts 3:1)

What were they doing at these intervals? Saying their prayers, either with others or alone. Using for the actual prayers portions from the Torah (Psalms, Deuteronomy. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one...”) and other set prayers.

Note: this is not all they were doing. There was **engagement** of the **heart**. There was **presence** of the Holy **Spirit**. But the actual form of their daily prayer was rather like a brown paper bag. They made use of these set prayer at regular intervals...it seems.

Hear now my confession as a former **Episcopalian**. The only prayer I knew growing up was “saying your prayers” prayer. I rarely saw anyone do it, except at church. Like so many others of my generation, this was part of faith I grew out of

not into. As a young adult, I landed as a born again Jesus Freak socialized to free-form, from-the-heart prayer. I still remember the awe I felt at hearing a friend address God informally and speak from the heart. Saying my prayer seemed like using a coloring book (keep it between lines, Kenny), whereas free form prayer was pick up your brush & fill in the canvas! There was no doubt in my mind which was the superior form.

If I were to give my fellow baby boomers of the Jesus movement this free association word exercise it might go like this: say your prayers: “nominal Christianity”; say your prayers: “rote”; say your prayers: “going through the motions”

I shoulda known: contempt is a no-no. Nothing blinds like it. What was I blind to? The facts. The disciples, likely following the example of Jesus, “said their prayers”: they used set prayers at fixed intervals.

Not all they did to pray was framed in this format, of course. Spontaneous prayer must have been included and practiced. So far as I know it's not **commanded** to use set prayers at fixed intervals. But I'm **embarrassed** by my **dismissing** this practice as **inferior**. Why this need to glorify spontaneous free form prayer at the expense of this other form?

[If we're going to play that game, remember: we never hear a single disciple pray spontaneously in the gospels. I'm sure they did, it's just not highlighted. But we do hear a Pharisee pray spontaneously, “I thank you God, that I'm not like this guy...” And that was straight from the heart too! Cheap polemics, sorry. But so is the other.]

Back to those facts: They were gathered at 9am on Pentecost, presumably to say their prayers and while they were at it, the Spirit fell. Peter is on the roof in Joppa saying his Noon prayers and the vision was given that allows the rest of us in on Jesus action. Peter and John are going to say their prayers at 3pm and on the way they heal a lame man who goes dancing in to the temple with them (where they said their prayers together?) If this is what **nominal, rote, going-thru-motions Christianity** is all about, I say: BRING IT ON!

Obviously what's going on here is much, much more than simply saying your prayers. We have the best of both worlds. These disciples are in grip of something wonderful. Smitten by Jesus, the risen Lord. Tasting the new wine of Holy Spirit. And this new life is **infusing** their brown paper bag form. When they open up their bag lunch, it's not baloney sandwiches, it's pastrami on manna bread from Zingerman's.

I repeat, remembering the first rule of preaching: do no harm! If your prayer life is already good, already sustaining you, and you are not using any set prayers like this—it's something different than this, maybe you are one of those

remarkable people who seems to engage in ongoing conversation with God more less through your day--well then, if it ain't broke don't fix it. (You may only want to expand your prayer repertoire if anger is a problem, or worry, or frustration.) One thing's for darn sure: prayer forms are secondary; helpful at best but not primary.

What reality does this practice of using set prayers at regular intervals underscore?

It reminds us we did not invent this God connection. It reminds us there has been a **conversation** going on before the foundation of the world between the Father and the Son. And that 4,000 years ago, give or take, **Abraham** and his offspring got invited into the conversation. And **Jesus**, the Word made flesh, the author & **founding partner** of the conversation also comes in as a participant, like us. Whoa! And he teaches his disciples to pray (gave 'em one, in fact, Lord's Prayer) and they in turn taught succeeding generations, and here we are! So there's been this conversation going on that goes way back. When we use these Psalms or pray the Lord's prayer or whatever, whenever we do—Morning? Morning & bed time? Morning, noon & night? More often if needier--we are **dipping our little rowboats** into this **deep, inexorable, old man of a river**, being carried along with its current. Who wouldn't want to?

Of course we dip in when we use our own words in our own way.

And whether or not we use The Divine Hours or its equivalent we all use set prayers. Every time you hum a worship song in your head, you're doing that. Or throw a CD into the car CD player. Or walk in here on the weekend and sing these songs. (It's not like we say, "**Unless I wrote the tune and words, it's not authentic**")! So this is not unfamiliar territory. There's just more available than these old hymns and new songs.

We'll close by answering 3 questions you're too shy to ask in public:

Q: Isn't this kind of Catholic? Yes and no. Catholic priests practice this kind of prayer. And some, but not all, religious (monks & nuns) do too. In my Ignatian Spiritual Direction Internship, I asked, "Isn't there some suggested baseline for daily prayer for Catholics?" and all three Catholic leaders denied up and down that there was. In fact there seems to be renewed interest in fixed hour prayer among non-liturgical evangelicals. If you don't recognize those terms you're not missing anything critical. I figure we're going to restore it to the Catholics, won't that be fun? Shame on me for tribal pridealism!

Seriously, what if it **were** Catholic? Why should the Catholics have all the fun? I hope we're not "**Trying to be Protestant**" I hope we're into Jesus, however that looks: Protestant, Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Coptic, Messianic, Jewish, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Quaker, None of the above!

Q: Why do I feel nervous every time we talk about prayer? There is a long tradition of thinking of the Jewish Temple as an analog of the human person. And to thinking of the increasing degree of holiness as one moves toward the center of the temple as analogous to the depths of the person. Outer courts, where we socialize, say—keep it light. Inner courts, where there's more at stake. The Holy Place is one step away from the Holy of Holies. Just to get your attention: if sex happens in the holy place of the human person, prayer happens in the holy of holies. (How difficult it was for Nancy and me—well me, mainly-- after we had been married for a year, to pray out loud together.)

So when we're talking about prayer, we're on sacred ground. And it's normal to be nervous on sacred ground. It's normal to feel insecure on sacred ground. If we're told to take off our shoes, will our socks have holes in them? Especially when you take into account we're just getting to know God after a long period of exile. So we tend to worry, "However it is I'm praying, must not be right. It must be inadequate." God love us, but we **carry something** with us into the holy of holies every time we go there: **our history of failure.**

But we're not in this holy place alone. Jesus is the one who's gotten us in here. And he's with us. And we can hide under his apron, so to speak, until we settle down. He's got us covered.

Q: How does use of set prayer at set intervals facilitate a 'prayer as place' experience? You would have to ask. I'm not sure yet. Maybe for some people, it takes the pressure off. (Don't try this until you see fixed hour prayer as a way to take the pressure off.) We don't have to work quite so hard at prayer. Trying hard has never been a great experience facilitator.

Maybe it's all those psalms, pilgrim songs, especially the songs of ascent, meant to be prayed on your way to the temple courts.

Maybe there's a hint in Acts 3:1 Comes after, "**The devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to prayer.**" (Acts 2:42) And the next time they pray, they are shown walking together in the City, Jerusalem, toward the temple courts for the 3pm prayers. It's the **real deal New Age** begun, and there they are still going somewhere to pray.

By time Acts is circulating, everyone knows the Temple is history, Jerusalem is a shadow of it's former self. So all this "place" business just evaporates—poof! And it's gone, a moot point? I don't think so. Maybe that's the hint. There's still somewhere to go—a heavenly Jerusalem, a **temple** carved out of the **rock** of the **stony heart** turned now to flesh--and these prayers are what we take with us and maybe what guide us on the journey to this place. Like I said, I don't know yet. But I'm curious.

[Optional: Maybe--cut me some slack here—maybe we all carry a kind of **communal memory** in us. (Our capacity to know what we know is determined by what's known before us.) Maybe memory, like our better understood physicality is more corporate or communal than we understand. (Our DNA is mostly a re-shuffle of what's been already) Maybe this communal memory **carves out pathways** in the human soul. In all of us, the memory of this path to the place exists, but it's overgrown. But these words of our forefathers & mothers, who knew this path, somehow awaken the latent memory in us? And we find our way... Like I said, I don't know yet. But I'm curious.]

Perhaps, and this may be the best explanation of all, when we pray using the set prayers of fixed our prayers, we remind ourselves that when we are alone in prayer we are never really alone. Even when we are alone, we pray in the company of others, and this company of others, the communion of saints, exists in a realm or a place called the kingdom of heaven.