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Reformation
& Revival



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Morning by morning, O Lord, You hear my voice; morning by morning I lay my requests before You and wait in expectation (Ps. 5:3).

Those who develop the habit of private prayer follow Jesus in a very special way. The Bible says, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed" (Mark 1:35).

This was Jesus' habit. Luke tells us that, the night before He called His followers and chose 12 disciples, Jesus "went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God" (6:12).

The beautiful thing about being a Christian is that those who follow Christ can follow Him to the private place of prayer and can talk there with their Father in heaven. In this they may imitate their Savior in an extremely significant manner.

But what about this private prayer? I have a feeling that many Christians don't know very much about it. Even those of us who know the secret of private prayer remember times when we called ourselves Christ's followers but didn't often follow Him to a private place to pray.

Those who do not know the joys and the power of private prayer must long for a deeper, more private relationship with God. Many of you who are reading this right now know something about Christianity, but you know virtually nothing about time spent alone in conversation with God. I don't mean that you don't pray. Of course you do. But your prayers are extremely brief. Once you have cried out in your need, you don't know what else to say. The simple fact is that you spend very, very little time in actual prayer to God.

Don't be satisfied with that. A little booklet called *The Kneeling Christian* says that prayerlessness is the secret of your failure. Often we talk about the secret of success, but what is the secret of the failure of gloomy, despondent,

“unsuccessful” Christians? They do not speak freely about their Savior. They do not turn over their burdens to Him. They sometimes fall into gross sin. In their hearts, they harbor envy and anger and greed and all sorts of emotions that have no place in the lives of those who claim to follow Christ. Not one of us can claim that he or she has not experienced failure as a Christian. What is the secret of our failure? Our prayerlessness.

So we must follow Christ in prayer. We must look back across the centuries and see Him rise early in the morning and make His way to the solitary place where He prayed. We must follow Him to our own private place and there learn the reality of private prayer. It is a discipline, but, like every discipline, it yields freedom.

Prayer is beautiful, and, if we are willing to let it, it can transform our lives. In this article, I wish to address whether we pray or not, where we pray, when we pray, what we pray for, how we pray (i.e., whether audibly or silently), what helps we need for our prayer, and what we should expect from private prayer. I write especially for those who have already confessed their sins and fled to Christ for salvation. I know that there are always readers who have not yet surrendered themselves to God’s saving grace—they have not asked Jesus to be the Lord of their lives. I hope, however, that, if you are not yet a Christian, you will continue to read about the blessings of private prayer. It could be that God will work in you and give you a holy jealousy so that you will not be able to rest until you enjoy private prayer yourself. I assure you that Jesus Christ wants nothing more than to have you come to Him in faith so that you can learn the glory of this holy exercise.

There are some people who believe in Christ but who don’t pray very much, because they tend to feel that it is really not very necessary to pray. If you ask them how they feel about prayer, they say something like this: “After all,

God is in charge of everything anyway, and He will do what He wants, so why bother praying?” Then they say that God knows their needs anyway, that there’s no use telling Him about things He already knows. They pray occasionally, but they don’t arrange their lives so that they can have a time of private prayer.

I understand their feelings, and I am very thankful that the Bible contradicts them. In Luke 11, we have the record of Jesus’ disciples asking Him to teach them to pray. He does teach them—He gives them what we now know as the Lord’s Prayer. He also does more. He indicates that they should use the avenue of prayer, that they should not hesitate to approach God and make their needs known to Him, because God does hear and answer prayer.

Jesus told His disciples several brief parables—special stories—in connection with prayer in Luke 11. (Why not look them up and read them?) They all can be summed up in this statement: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (vv. 9-10).

So let there be no question about whether we should pray. God is greater than our logic, and when it comes to the things of the Spirit, we must not be logical but biblical. Jesus not only teaches us to pray, but also encourages us in the strongest possible language to practice prayer. Those who do not arrange their lives so that they can enjoy the advantages of private prayer miss out on the full wonder of what it means to be a Christian.

Surely we should pray. About this there is no doubt whatsoever. But where? In a sense, location makes no difference. There is a form of continual prayer, which I cannot get into now, that Christians should be involved in all the time. That kind of prayer obviously can and should be done everywhere. But when it comes to private prayer,

the kind by which we follow Christ to the solitary place, it is good to have a special place to pray.

In Matthew 6:6 Jesus tells us, “When you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen.” Each of us should have a special room to go to in order to pray. I realize that many of us just don’t have a room that we can use, because our apartments are too crowded. Some of you who are reading this little article are living in barracks or even in cell blocks. Privacy is very precious, and, unfortunately, many people these days have a hard time finding any. If you are in a situation in which privacy is scarce, you will have to use your ingenuity to try to find some somewhere. Maybe you’ll have to go out into the garage, or storeroom, or somewhere in the basement.

If you have a room available to you, that is the ideal place to go. And I strongly suggest that you have your private prayer in the same place as much as possible. It should be a place where you cannot be observed or heard, and where you cannot hear all the sounds of what is going on elsewhere.

Privacy is not just incidental in this kind of prayer. Private prayer must be between yourself and God. You should not discuss your prayers a great deal with others. Prayer is powerful when it is not affected in any way by the judgments of others.

Now, finding a private place can be related to your time of prayer, for some places are often more private at one time than at another. When should you pray? Well, there is a sense in which faith-filled people pray all the time—they try to live in obedience to God and to think about His will for their lives, so what they do and say is a form of prayer. But private prayer—the kind of prayer Jesus clearly practiced and recommended that you practice—when should you have such prayer?

In answering this question, you must make allowances for the fact that people differ with respect to when they are

most alert. We should remember that there are morning people and night people. It would be unrealistic to suggest that night people have their private prayers in the morning. One very fine Christian I know says very frankly that his faith is very imperfect before 9 a.m., especially before he has his first cup of coffee.

Even so, there is reason to believe that, when the Bible talks about private prayer, it considers that in many cases there will be morning prayers. Jesus’ solitary prayers were early morning prayers and prayers that went on through the night. Apparently, the important thing about the matter of time is that private prayer works best in a time of stillness. And it is not necessary to limit such praying only to one time of day. Psalm 55:17 says, “Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and He hears my voice.”

There are, however, several advantages that come with early-morning prayers. First, the stillness of the time before dawn helps in private prayer. Second, and this is even more important, our own minds are still uncluttered by the events of the day. Then, too, when we rise early to call upon the Lord, it is often the easiest time to find a private place.

In connection with this, I also want to mention that private prayer should be of some substantial duration. Jesus spent extended periods of time in private prayer. If you are new at praying in private, you may wish to start with five or ten minutes, but, before long, fifteen minutes will probably become a minimum for you. You will look forward to days when you don’t have to go to work, holidays and the like, when you can spend more time praying. Yes, there should be a time set aside that is approached carefully and arranged deliberately so that you do not pray quickly and then rush away as soon as possible. You may need some kind of clock that helps you make sure you get up on time and that signals when you should conclude your prayers (because there are other things that must be done).

Many of you will have to arrange your lives so that you can get up on time to have your private prayers. This may mean that you will have to go to bed earlier in the evening, but all this is part of the discipline of prayer, a discipline that ultimately yields liberation.

How should you conduct your private prayers? Should they be audible or silent? It is possible to pray to God silently. When you have good control, your thoughts can march through your mind as efficiently as if you were speaking out loud. But you often do not have good control of your mind, do you? People who pray silently in the early morning are very apt to find themselves becoming drowsy and confused; when they are through, they may wonder what they have actually prayed about. In general, then, your time of private prayer is a time to formulate your prayers audibly. It is important, as well, to arrange your thoughts and to speak sensibly and coherently to the Lord. Many times, combinations of silent and audible prayer may work out well. The important thing is that you maintain your attention and do not think that you are praying when you are actually in the process of falling asleep.

Therefore, it is also important that you have proper posture in prayer. When it comes to prayer posture, no one has found an improvement on kneeling. For many, this is surely the posture of choice in private prayer. It would be a mistake to try to pray while lounging in one's favorite easy chair. That is quite counterproductive.

Now the important question—what should you actually pray for, or pray about, during your time of private prayer? I cannot begin to answer this question in such a brief article, for there are so many subjects to pray about that will come up in your private prayers over a period of time, especially as you become more and more accustomed to having this special time with God each day.

You must remember, though, that the primary idea in

prayer is asking. When Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, He taught them a prayer that was made up of requests. In Luke 11, we read that He encourages them to pray by saying that those who ask for things will receive them. In private prayer, you can lay all your needs before the Lord. It is a time to pray for others, as we all are obligated to do. Often God brings difficult circumstances into our lives or the lives of those who are very precious to us so that we will learn to lean on Him in prayer. This is what Psalm 5:3 expresses when it says, "In the morning I lay my requests before You and wait in expectation."

In your private prayers you will find that, along with your requests, you will also naturally offer praise and thanksgiving to God for all His mercies to you. One cannot experience the joy of private prayer without being moved to praise God for His goodness. You may find yourself calling out, in the words of Psalm 145, "I will exalt You, my God the King; I will praise Your name for ever and ever . . . Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; His greatness no one can fathom" (vv.1,3).

There will also be your confession of sin. The person who meets God in private prayer grows to see himself or herself as the *chief of sinners*. There is nothing like private prayer for humbling people. The sins of others recede into the background, and pray-ers see themselves for what they really are. It is a time to bare your heart before the Lord and to ask Him once again—you always end up asking for something, you see—to cleanse you and to fill you with His Spirit.

In addition to all of this, you will need helps in order to get the full benefit of private prayer. You will need the Bible. Often when praising God, it is best to use the words He gives us in His Scripture. You should have it open before you as you pray, and, over a period of time, you will learn to look to special places for the words you want—to tell God how

much you love Him and how much you want to magnify His name. In the Bible, too, are words of confession—Psalm 51 tells us about our own unworthiness. You may want to write passages on cards and use them as you pray. Over a period of time, those words will be burned into your memory. Surely you need God's Word right there with you in your solitary place.

It is also good to have a prayer list—to make sure that you remember all you should remember when you come to God. As you pray more and more, you will realize that you have a great responsibility to pray for others and that you can do this best by having some kind of list. There will be instances in which you should pray for specific things for special people. And as you pray for the salvation of certain people whom God has put on your heart, you may find it helpful to have a special card for each person.

When you pray for someone who has cancer, for example, you should not simply ask God to bless that person, but pray that He will destroy cancer cells in that person's body. You should pray as specifically as you can for people. You owe it to them. Those who belong to Christ have this high priestly responsibility.

The blessings that accompany private prayer are too numerous to list. I will conclude with a brief consideration of a few of the more obvious ones.

There is the joy of anticipation—you are always able to look forward to meeting God in that private place, and you know that there you will again be able to cast your burdens on Him. There is also the peace that passes all understanding. When you bring to God your deepest needs and the needs of others, you can feel the calm that comes from knowing that He is in control, and that you can trust Him. There are so many situations in life over which we have no control, but we can pray about them. Another blessing is this: as you learn the discipline of private prayer, you will know that one

of the reasons these situations have happened is that God is heeding your request. Private prayer is an overwhelming privilege, and it is there for anyone who humbles himself before the Lord and learns to pray.

In our private places, we are in the presence of our loving Father, and we realize that He is preparing us for eternity—when we will be able to talk to God face to face.

Our continual prayer needs to be, "Lord, teach us to pray." We have much to learn. We need to overcome our tendencies to put all sorts of things ahead of our need to pray. We need God's help in arranging our lives so that we really do pray. And when we come to the private place, we need to be taught the wonder and glory of talking with such an awesome God!

Author

Dr. Joel Nederhood, a minister of the Christian Reformed Church, serves as radio minister of *The Back to God Hour*, a weekly broadcast of his denomination. This article is an edited version of a radio address given by Dr. Nederhood in January 1986. Helpful messages by Dr. Nederhood can be secured by writing:

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