

Reflections on Private Prayer:

Back in 1942 George Buttrick, minister of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City wrote a book entitled **Prayer**. Though many books have been written on prayer this one stands out. It has been described as "one of the most thorough and comprehensive books on prayer ever written."

Buttrick's observations on prayer included the following comments on private prayer.

We now attempt to give some clear and detailed guidance in private prayer. There can be no rules, certainly no binding rules, but only hints. Yet no one need travel an unmarked path. The saints are our teachers; and other people, versed in prayer, who would be aghast to be called saints. Jesus himself is **the** Teacher.

Prayer is friendship with God. Friendship is not formal, but it is not formless: it has its cultivation, its behavior, its obligations, even its disciplines; and the casual mind kills it. So we offer here, as a guide-map not as a chain, a simple regimen of private prayer.

Preparation for Prayer:

Prayer begins, not as asking, but in a silent self preparation. We should not rush into the presence, the church of private devotion should be entered through the vestibule in an orderly quietness. This comes best as a by-product of a mind focused on God.

In this initial silence of prayer we say to ourselves that whatever we ask "in the nature of Christ" is ours, granted only our earnestness in prayer and life. We take counsel with our certitudes, not with our doubts and fears.

Thanksgiving:

In prayer itself there is no fixed order, but both a primary impulse and the experience of praying people show that the first stage may be thanksgiving.

We need deliberately to call to mind the joys of our journey. Perhaps we should try to write down the blessings of one day. We might begin: we could never end: there are not pens or paper enough in all the world.

Therefore the prayer of thanksgiving should be quite specific: ... If we are "thankful for everything." we may end up by being thankful for nothing.

"Count your many blessings," says the old hymn, "and, it will surprise you what the Lord hath done."

Confession:

Prayer may next become confession. A rebound of nature hints that this is a wise order. "God has been exceedingly kind, and I have given him selfishness for love."

Confession to those we have wronged is sometimes, not always, wise: there are circumstances in which such confession would spread and aggravate the hurt. But confession to God, whom we have more deeply wronged, is always wise: he has understanding and love.

Our sin is against the Living Order, and we have neither inward peace nor inward power until we have offered a prayer of penitence. Confession, like thanksgiving, should be specific. It should not be ruthless, but it should not excuse ...

The wise prayer of confession always leads to an acceptance of God's pardon. ... God does not wish us to remember, except as a reminder of our dependence, for he is willing to forget anything. ... True confession is a cleansing of the soul.

Intercession (our prayers for others):

Then may follow a prayer of intercession, without which the most earnest prayer may sink into selfishness. The Lord's prayer in almost every phrase keeps us mindful of our neighbors: "Our Father" ... "our daily bread" ... "our trespasses."

Private intercession should be specific. Genuine love sees faces, not a mass: the good shepherd "calleth his own sheep by name." Intercession is more than specific: it is pondered: it requires us to bear on our heart the burden of those for whom we pray.

Whose name should come first? Perhaps the name of our enemies. Intercession also names the leaders of mankind in statecraft, medicine, learning, art and religion; the needy of the world; our friends at work or play, and our loved ones.

Petition (our prayers for ourselves):

The fourth order in our prayers may be petition. It comes last, not because it is most important, but because it needs the safeguard of earlier prayers. We should not fear to lift our earthly needs before Eternal Eyes, for we are held in Eternal Love.

But we should fear the encroachment of a selfish mind. Petition is defended against that threat if first we give thanks, confess our sins, and pray for our neighbours. Then the petition may have free course.

Sometimes in sorrow, dread, or helplessness, it will be a crises cry of creaturehood - a beating on heaven's door with bruised knuckles in the dark. Sometimes it will be friendship-talk with God about the affairs of everyday. Surely both prayers would be approved by Christ: his disciples cried in their extremity "Lord, save us"; and day by day they spoke with him about their struggles, enigmas, and joys of the journey.

To try to thwart the prayer of petition is to deny human nature. The New Testament has better wisdom: "Be overanxious for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." Yet petition should be grown in grace so as to "covet earnestly the best gifts"; and it should always acknowledge that our sight is dim and that our purposes are mixed in motive. It should always conclude with, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done."

The intervals of these four prayers should be filled by meditation. After thanksgiving we should contemplate God's abounding goodness, and await his word concerning his own gifts. After confession we should adore the pardoning Love made known in Christ, and listen for his guidance. After intercession we should pause to try to see the whole world's need as Christ saw it from the cross. After petition we should wait again to meditate upon the Will.

Prayer is listening as well as speaking, receiving as well as asking; and its deepest mood is friendship held in reverence. So the daily prayer should end as it begins - in adoration. The best conclusion is, "In the name of Jesus Christ: Amen." For in the name or nature of Jesus is our best understanding of God, and the best corrective of our blundering prayers. The word "Amen" is not idle: it means "So let it be." It is our resolve to live faithfully in the direction of our prayers, and our act of faith in God's power.