



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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NO TIME FOR PRAYER

Christians who take their faith seriously want to pray. We want to put in the time to make the most of our Christian lives, to grow into the full stature of Christ, so far as we are able. The amount of available time varies widely according to our other responsibilities in life. A retired person, living alone, usually has the chance to find a good solid chunk of time each day for the daily office, meditation, intercession. At the other extreme perhaps, a new mother with other young children at home has little time to call her own, time that she can set aside each day to be quiet for prayer.

Others also have little available time for prayer. A man works two jobs to support his family, leaving little time to spend with them, much less anything else. Another has the responsibility of caring for an invalid parent -- a live-in, twenty-four hour responsibility. Or a mother must hold a job outside the home as well as taking care of home and children.

Or having little time for prayer may happen to us at certain times. We find ourselves sharing a hotel room with another person on a trip. Our time is not within our control. Or our other responsibilities are such that we simply cannot take the time -- even from sleep -- for our accustomed prayers.

We live in an age of frantic busyness, a nation of people who do not even get enough sleep. There always seems to be too much to do. But even if we resist the temptation to become over-extended, there are situations in which we simply do not have the time available for the "normal" Christian prayer life. Our standard of Christian life includes time for the daily office and meditation, Sunday worship, some regular intercessions, spiritual reading, Bible study. While we may not get all of these in as much as we would like, we largely accept this as the standard, and rightly so.

So what are we to do if we find ourselves in a situation where this is not possible? If the nursing mother with small children clings to the model of daily quiet time apart, frustration is inevitable. It is not possible to tell the baby to be quiet while Mommy says her prayers! More, the maternal responsibility has a certain priority -- it is God-given, and few things in this life are more important than the nurture of children.

Those are the times when we must cultivate other habits of prayer, habits which are suited to the particular conditions of our life. This requires that we alter our expectations. If God has given us responsibilities which will not allow a solid daily quiet time, then He will give us other opportunities to sustain our prayer life. We will miss those opportunities if we are looking only at what we think we ought to be doing, at what will satisfy our standards. If we moan about not being able to get the time we want (and think we need), then we will fail to make the most of the difficulty. For in the Christian life, adversities are also opportunities.

Rather, admitting that we cannot have our "ideal," we should look at what is possible. There are a variety of forms of prayer which are possible, even when the time for a set daily quiet is not available. We may need some flexibility and creativity. But it is a reasonable assumption that if God has placed us in the situation (or permitted it to be inflicted upon us) then He will give us all we need to get through it.

Generally, the aim is to use such opportunities as we have to share the occurrences of daily life with God. One possibility is to take the time which is already committed to certain necessary tasks, and use it for prayer as well as for the task. Obviously, not all tasks are suited to dual use, as they require that we pay attention to what we are doing in a way that precludes any sort of prayer. But manual labor, routine things that we do without thinking anyway, can be turned to prayer. If the task is done every day, this has the added advantage of connecting the prayer with something we are already doing. Then, once the habit is established, we have an easier time remembering to pray.

For example, washing the dishes might be a good time for intercession. We could tack up a list of people we want to pray for over the sink or put photographs on the refrigerator (or inside a nearby cupboard if that doesn't fit the decor). Then as we get down to cleaning up, we can use the routine time for intercession.

Or the daily self-examination might be done during a nightly shower or bath. This self-examination is no more than five minutes: a couple minutes to recall our sins of the day and tell God we are sorry; another minute or two to give thanks for those times when God's grace overcame our temptation; a moment to ask help for the particular difficulties we are to face on the morrow. This valuable exercise helps us to recognize God's presence and assistance in our daily lives. Yet it is

a hard habit to establish, since we never find it pleasant to face our sins. Doing the self-examination at some point during the routine of getting ready for bed -- in the shower, when brushing teeth -- makes it a part of the daily routine. This can be useful even if we do maintain a daily set prayer time.

Prayer at mealtime is another possibility. Remembering to say grace (something more than rote) puts us in mind of God and His mercy towards us. If we eat alone, perhaps we can make a bit more of the time than just thanks for the food. We might share a bit with God of the things that are going on, our needs, joys, etc. We might even do this in lieu of reading a magazine or watching television while we eat.

Driving also presents possibilities, especially commuting. While for most of us, driving requires a fair degree of attention (especially during rush hour in the city!), there is often some occasion for prayer. We can pray for patience with the other drivers -- who can be provoking. We can pray for the needs we will have during the day -- for work and doing it to our best ability, and for doing it without compromising our Christian faith. We can pray for our family whom we have left behind for the day. If the driving is less taxing, we may be able to do more, praying about all the things we would if we could take a regular time. It is vital, of course, not to get so wrapped up in prayer that we compromise our driving! That is the danger with trying to do two things at once.

We should also try to cultivate the habit of placing ourselves in God's hands at bedtime and waking. It helps to make the sign of the cross when we lie down and when we awake. As with table grace, this helps keep us in mind of our Lord, who has given us life and for whom we live.

Another approach to praying without time is the habitual sense of God's presence and activity in our lives. This comes more easily to some Christians. Some people can keep up a running conversation with God as they go through the day -- thanking Him for the beautiful things they see, interceding for those who need help, asking help ourselves as we do the things each day. For others this takes a good deal of conscious effort to develop.

The idea is to "pray without ceasing" as St Paul suggests. This is not a matter of always thinking about God, for then we would not be able to do the things He has given us to do, many of which require close attention. We could not do them well were we trying to think about something else at the same time.

We all face innumerable occasions in the course of a day when we need a little help from God, and when we can be thankful for little blessings from Him. As we face an occasion of need -- a difficult boss summons us to his office -- we can ask God's help, like Nehemiah before the king (Nehemiah 2:4-5). Or we need help getting a big project done by the deadline -- we can ask help as we go to work, and give

thanks for God's help when we finish. Or the baby manages to sleep all night, letting his parents get a whole night's sleep: this is cause for thanksgiving in the morning. Or we can utter a word of thanks to God when the mayonnaise jar doesn't break when we drop it on the kitchen floor. The little things are important here as well as the big.

Another means of accomplishing such habitual prayer is the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." It can be shortened to "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." It is easily coordinated with our breathing, the first half on the inhale. While this is a well-established technique for the prayer of quiet, it can also function during the busyness of the day. It tends to relax the flesh by placing us in God's hands, trusting Him for the care and direction of our life. It acknowledges the two great essentials of Christian life: who God is (Lord and Saviour), and who we are in relation to Him (sinners in need of His mercy, which He has promised to give us).

When we have the opportunity (during manual work, or driving, or a break from work, or changing a diaper), we can say the Jesus prayer silently, even if only for a few moments. We then recall that we are not alone, and that the work before us is sanctified by God's blessing. However menial, our work is not meaningless if we do it in Him.

Many of these techniques will work just as well for those who have established prayer time each day. Most of us will be able to find some time to go apart for prayer, if we are willing to work at it. We make the time for Sunday services, and even weekday services, and yet have difficulty finding time for quiet. Sometimes it is not so much that the time isn't there as that we are unwilling to find it.

We need to be honest about this, to look at the time we spend on television, newspapers, magazines, etc. To take time for prayer always involves sacrifice of something else. Even if the something else is of little value to us, it may still be something of an attachment. The old habits die hard, and anything of value to our Christian life will meet opposition from the "old man:" that deep root of selfishness within us.

There is hope even for those whose situation in life precludes daily quiet -- though their numbers are rather fewer than they think! If God permits such situations, He will also provide the opportunities for a rich and full life of prayer. The ways and means of that prayer are apt to be a bit different from our usual ideal. But God is Lord. That means He is in charge of our prayer life. However He wills to structure it is good. For our part, we should be sensitive to the opportunities He gives us, and make the most of what He offers. We need not be frustrated and impatient because our prayer life does not conform to the "standard." Instead, we should be grateful that God cares so much that He gives us our unique prayer life, designed just for us. It is a sign that He cares for us more than we realized, not less.