



Lesson One in Prayer

Let's get very, very basic and very, very practical about prayer. The single most important piece of advice I know about prayer is also the simplest: *Just do it!*

How to do it is less important than just doing it. Less-than-perfect prayer is infinitely better than no prayer; more perfect prayer is only finitely better than less perfect prayer.

Nancy Reagan was criticized for her simple anti-drug slogan: "Just say no." But there was wisdom there: the wisdom that the heart of any successful program to stop anything must be the simple will to say no. ("Just say no" doesn't mean that nothing else was needed, but that without that simple decision nothing else would work. "Just say no" may not be *sufficient* but it is *necessary*.)

Similarly, no program, method, book, teacher, or technique will ever succeed in getting us to *start* doing anything unless there is first of all that simple, absolute choice to do it. "Just say yes."

The major obstacle in most of our lives to just saying yes to prayer, the most popular and powerful excuse we give for not praying, or not praying more, or not praying regularly, is that we have no time.

The only effective answer to that excuse, I find, is a kind of murder. You have to kill something, you have to say no to something else, in order to make time to pray. Of course, you will never *find* time to pray, you have to *make* time to pray. And that means unmaking something else. The only way to install the tenant of prayer in the apartment building of your life is to evict some other tenant from those premises that prayer will occupy. Few of us have any empty rooms available.

Deciding to do that is the first thing. And you probably won't decide to do it, only *wish* to do it, unless you see prayer for what it is: a matter of life or death, your lifeline to God, to life itself.

Is this exaggerated? Are there more important things? Love, for instance? We need love absolutely; but the love we need is *agape*, the love that only God has and is; so unless we go to God for it, we won't get it. And going to God for it means prayer. So *unless we pray, we will not love*.

Having got that clear and having made prayer your number one priority, having made a definite decision to do it, we must next rearrange our lives around it. Rearranging your time, preparing time to pray, is like preparing your house to paint. As everyone knows who has done any painting, preparation is three-quarters the work, three-quarters the hassle, and three-quarters the time. The actual painting is a breeze compared with the preparation. The same is true of prayer: the hardest step is preparing a place, a time, a sacred and inviolable part of each day for it. Prayer is like Thanksgiving dinner. It takes one hour to eat it and ten hours to prepare it. Prayer is like Christmas Day: it took a month of preparation, decoration, and shopping to arrange for that one day. Best of all, prayer is like love. Foreplay is, or should be, most of it. For two people truly and totally in love, all of their lives together is foreplay. Well, prayer is like spiritual love-making. God has waited patiently for you for a long, long time. He longs for you to touch the fringe of his being in prayer, as the woman touched the hem of Christ's garment, so that you can be healed. How many hours did that woman have to prepare for that one-minute touch?

The first and most important piece of practical preparation is scheduling. You absolutely must schedule a regular time for prayer, whether you are a "scheduler" with other things in your life or not. "Catch as catch can" simply won't work for prayer; it will mean less and less prayer, or none at all. One quick minute in the morning to offer your day to God is better than nothing at all, of course, but it is as radically inadequate as one quick minute a day with your wife or husband. You simply must decide each day to free up your schedule so you can pray.

How long a time? That varies with individuals and situations, of course; but the very barest minimum should certainly be at least fifteen minutes. You can't really count on getting much deep stuff going on in less time than that. If fifteen minutes seems too much to you, that fact is powerful proof that you need to pray much more to get your head on straight.

After it becomes more habitual and easy, expand it, double it. And later, double it again. Aim at an hour each day, if you want radical results. (*Do you? Or are you only playing?*)

What time of day is best? The most popular time—bedtime—is usually the worst possible time, for two reasons. First, it tends not to be prime time but garbage time, when you're the least alert and awake. Do you really want to put God in the worst apartment in your building? Should you offer him the sickest sheep in your flock?

Second, it won't work. If you wait until every other obligation is taken care of first before you pray, you simply won't pray. For life today is so cruelly complicated for most of us that "every other obligation" is *never* taken care of. Remember, you are going to have to kill other things in order to pray. No way out of that.

The most obvious and usually best time is early in the morning. If you can't delay the other things you do, you simply must get up that much earlier.

Should it be the very first thing? That depends. Some people are alert as soon as they get up; others need to shower and dress to wake up. The important thing is to give God the best time, and "just do it."

Place is almost as important as time. You should make one special place where you can be undisturbed. "Catch as catch can" won't work for place either.

What place? Some people are not very sensitive to environment and can even use a bathroom. Others naturally seek beauty: a porch, yard, garden, or walk. (I find praying while you take a walk a good combination of spiritual and physical exercise.)

You probably noticed I haven't said a word about techniques yet. That's because three-quarters is preparation, remember? But what about methods?

I can only speak from my own experience as a continuing beginner. The two most effective that I have found are very simple. One is praying Scripture, reading and praying at the same time, reading in God's presence, receiving the words from God's mouth. The second is spontaneous verbal prayer. I am not good at all at silent prayer, mental prayer, contemplative prayer; my thoughts hop around like fleas. Praying aloud (or singing) keeps me praying, at least. And I find it often naturally leads to silent prayer often, or "mental prayer," or contemplation.

Most advice on prayer focuses on higher levels: contemplative prayer. But I suspect many of my readers are prayer infants too and need to learn to walk before they can run. So these are some lessons from one man's prayer kindergarten. Let's "just do it" even if "it" is only crawling towards God.