

The Meaning of Prayer: Reflections With Harry Emerson Fosdick

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1. Prayer is natural.

Prayer is natural to us as human beings. Skeptics abound in matters of prayer.

Yet, in times of crisis, in times of great responsibility, people who do not pray on a regular basis often turn to prayer. In Psalm 107:23-28, we have the example of sailors who are in trouble on the sea. "Then they cry to the Lord in their trouble."

Unfortunately, this type of prayer can become almost magical. We view God as someone who gets us out of trouble. We never seem to outgrow the need for prayer. No matter how scientific we become, we seem to have this inner need to pray. We meditate upon our lives. We give ourselves time to reflect upon the direction of our lives. That is how natural prayer can be for us. If we only call upon God for help in time of trouble, we are not tapping into the immense resources that God has made available through Jesus Christ. We know now that God desires to become the friend of each one of us. God becomes an inward and abiding friend, a purifying presence in daily life. When we recognize that prayer only in the time of trouble becomes a selfish demand we place upon God. The tendency to pray lays deep within us. However, unless prayer is developed, it will become nothing more than a selfish cry of need. If we develop a life of prayer as a daily habit of relationship, the possibilities for our lives are almost limitless.

2. Prayer is communion with God.

It is so easy to think of prayer as an opportunity to beg things from God. At the time, what we ask of God may appear to be very important. Upon reflection, however, we must admit that often we ask for trivial things. Too often, we do not practice the kind of prayer we need the most. That is the type of prayer that makes it clear that what we desire above all else is friendship with God. In that sense, we are like children. Our children begin their relationship with us desiring what we can give them. However, I hope in every parent and child relationship we can look to those moments when we know that much more is involved. That child recognizes the love of the parent, and the value of the relationship beyond any gifts the parent may give. Yes, God desires to give us all the blessings this life can offer. However, if all those blessings were taken away (many Christians have had that experience, either in persecution or other unfortunate circumstances) our friendship with God does not need to be affected. Rather, we can learn that this is precisely what we depend upon for our daily nourishment. In this sense, prayer becomes a matter of a continuous attitude we carry with us throughout the day. For too many of us, God is remote and distant. Only in this kind of prayer does God become alive to us. The greatest gift of God in prayer is not things, but God's own self.

We will reach maturity in Christian life when we cease coming to the Lord merely because of the things God may give. Rather, we come into the love of God and the desire God to shape us into the person God would have us to be. Thomas á Kempis offered a prayer in which he said: Whatever you bestow upon me, it is too small and unsatisfying apart from you, O God. Whatever you reveal or promise to me, if you are not seen and fully attained, it will not satisfy me. For surely my heart cannot truly rest, nor be entirely contented, unless it rest in you. Amen.

3. Prayer believes in God's care for the individual.

Does God take a personal interest in us? This is a major step of faith in our walk with the Lord. Prayer will never have the sustaining power in our lives that we need until we experience prayer as sustaining our friendship with a God who cares for every one of us. Until we come to this experience of prayer, it will be a duty rather than a privilege.

One of the reasons prayer becomes little more than form is that we believe in God in a general sense and in a vague fashion. We do not have a vivid and lively sense of the presence and reality of God. If we do not believe God cares for us as individuals, then God becomes increasingly remote. Why pray to this God? Only out of habit. We do not grasp the power that exists in the individual love of God.

It can be difficult to believe God loves us as individuals. We seem too small and insignificant for God to spend much time with us. The universe is so vast! To experience the power of prayer is to believe that even in the midst of such a universe, God cares for each individual soul more than the material world in which we live. In God's sight, the vast expanse of the universe does not compare to our own soul.

Sometimes we maintain childish notions of prayer. It is simply a way of getting what we want, rather than aligning ourselves to the will of God. It becomes little more than a good work to win favor with God, rather than a vital relationship with God. Prayer is an opportunity to claim our rights as children of God through faith, the appropriation of our heritage as children of God. As the scriptures proclaim, the riches of Christ are available to us. We so rarely behave in a way that believes we are rich in spiritual treasures.

What is “big” enamors us, for “big is better.” Fortunately for us, God cares for the soul, the beings into whom God breathed life, is of infinite value. The multitudes may overwhelm us. Why does God choose us from the multitude and focus upon us? Yet, the Bible speaks of that God. God’s care and knowledge of the whole creation does not preclude God’s care for and knowledge of you and I. In the midst of the vast expanse of the universe, God has a unique place for every life, a unique reason for why we are here. Prayer is the personal appropriation of this faith that, indeed, God does care for us individuals. God is no longer a theory. God is the one whom we place our trust. We enter fellowship with God, not just believe the creed of the church about God. In true prayer, we move from the intellectual affirmation that God exists, and place ourselves at God’s disposal.

4. Prayer believes in the goodness of God.

In one sense, the goodness of God presents us with a problem in prayer. Why pray, if God is good? God knows what we need before we ask. Why pray? God already desires the best for us. Why pray? Such believe in the providence of God shrinks from prayer. Of course, this objection runs into the experience of Jesus himself. He prayed. In fact, the love and wisdom of God were the foundations of the prayer of Jesus. We can pray with confidence because of God's goodness. Prayer is simply giving the wise and good God an opportunity to do what God's wisdom and love want done.

There are many misconceptions of prayer. Among the most harmful is the idea that prayer is a way of getting God to do our will. So conceived, prayer is simply self-will. It is expecting God to back us up and give us the right of way. Consider how often our praying is a demand on God that God shall do exactly what we want. Many of us believe in only a part of God. They believe in God's love. Therefore, we can coax God into doing what we want. As children might beg from an adult to get what they want, so we believe if we ask in the right manner, we can get what we want. We do not really believe in God's wisdom. Such wisdom is the knowledge of God for what is best for all of us. It is God's own will, God's plan for the character and the career of each of us. Do we believe in the whole of God? Then prayer becomes a way of opening our lives to God in such a way that God can do in us what God wants to do.

To open our lives to God we first need solitude, where we give ourselves a chance to hear the voice of God. God can never do some things until God finds someone who prays. This simply makes sense. God can never do some things unless people are willing to work. God can never do some things unless people are willing to think. In the same, way God can never do some things unless people are willing to pray. Most of us would

not abandon work or thinking. Why do we push prayer into a small corner of our lives? God cannot do some things unless we pray. God cannot give some things to us unless we pray. Before we can receive any great gift, we need a receptive heart. God cannot do some things through us unless we pray. The saints were never content with working for God. Rather, they have made it their ideal to let God work through them. For such a person, God opens the doors into the world.

To open our lives to the guidance of God requires us to be in a receptive mood. The dominant mood today is active. Yet, some things never come to us until we are receptive. Among the most difficult endeavors of God is to get us to be quiet enough to listen.

Prayer opens our lives to God so that we can do the will of God in and through us. In true prayer we put ourselves into the attitude of willingness to do whatever God wills. We need to hand God our lives as a blank check. God fills in the check as God wills. There must be no provisions or reservations. We rightly distrust people. We do not dare to mistrust God. God's wisdom, God's love, God's power to see us through, is trustworthy. We must be willing to do whatever God wills. True prayer is deliberately putting us at God's disposal.

The most transforming influences in life are personal friendships. We become open to the heart, ideas, ideals, and spiritual quality of another person. We cannot buy, earn or achieve the most precious things in life. We catch them by association. True prayer is regularly putting oneself in the circle of God's friendship.

If we take out of life the solitude where we can hear God's voice, the willingness to do whatever God wills, and the fellowship that gives God's influence an opportunity, what can God do with that life?

5. Prayer encounters hindrances and difficulties.

The practice of prayer is not so simple as words sometimes make it seem. For example, prayer assumes the awareness of the presence of God. Yet, this is often not as automatic as we might wish. The sense of God's presence is often a laborious achievement of the spirit. We ought not to take God's presence for granted. All of us have moods when the vision of God grows dim. We need to recognize that this is a familiar experience, and therefore not become discouraged. To surrender to such moods is to leave ourselves open to failure in Christian discipleship. Still others do not seem to feel easily the presence of God. We need to recognize that there are many ways of praying, even in the bible. The best of the saints experienced times when it seemed like their prayers were little more than talking to empty space. Prayer calls us to our own hearts. It is in our hearts that we communion with God. We focus upon our search for God. We need to recognize that God is searching for us. Read Luke 15. According to the way most of us pray, the shepherd is lost, and the sheep have gone out to find him. We are the ones who wander. God is the one seeking us and bringing us home. God's search for us is before our search for God. Prayer is not groping after God. Prayer is opening our lives to God. Finding God is really allowing God to find us.

Prayer is costly. It does cost to win a life empowered by prayer.

One such cost is self-discipline in behavior and thinking. We cannot regularly indulge in perverse or abominable thoughts and suddenly come away from them and into unimpeded communion with God.

Another such cost is special preparation. The mood may not be right. An irritated or anxious attitude may be in the way. Preoccupation of business may still be straining our minds. Consider with what rash hastiness, unprepared thoughts,

preoccupied minds, and unexamined lives we often rush into God's presence and out again.

A third such cost is persistence in the face of difficulties. Yes, God may not feel real at times. Our minds wander in prayer. Our mood may not be conducive to prayer. We may be disappointed in prayer that seems to get no results. Our minds all too easily become a home for thoughts about self, evil, daydreams, and love fancies. We desire to know God better. Yet, we often find it difficult to keep our minds upon God for more than two minutes.

A fourth cost may be the morning hours. Of course, we can give any time of the day to prayer. For most of us, however, our days become preoccupied by the business of the day. We will likely need to offer the morning hours to God in prayer.

Prayer costs patience with commonplace hours. Our moods change. If we are persistent in prayer, the glow of God's presence will more regularly abide with us throughout the day.

The results of such a life of prayer are worth the cost. It is worth giving our lives to it.

6. Prayer faces the modern, scientific worldview.

The Bible ascribes all the activities of the universe to the influence of God. The idea of a rational, scientific operation of the universe is not available to the biblical authors. Some of us may still have the belief that God says to the sun each morning: “All right, it is time to get up.” However, most of us have become aware enough of science to know that the universe operates according to its own system. The world begins to look like a vast machine that runs itself. Does such an awareness of scientific laws push God further way? The new knowledge of the universe and of history that we gain makes us realize that our more childish notions of God became inadequate. We need a larger view of God to meet the new need of this modern, scientific world. Without such honest reflection, we may abandon, in a practical way, any thought of God all together.

Through our modern, scientific view of the world, we push God further back into history. If we think of God at all, God becomes the engineer who started the universe and history. God does not have direct involvement in the universe or in history. To the extent that we think in this way, we hinder our life of prayer.

The modern, scientific view of the universe and of history seems to exclude a belief in the guiding providence of God. Yet, this connection between our lives and the general purpose of God is vital for a life of prayer. If God cannot mould people and events, then what is the use of praying?

To take these reflections a step further, how can God shape the course of nature and history without interfering with the perceived natural laws that guide them? Are miracles possible, given our modern, scientific world? Without belaboring the point, maybe we need to consider the possibility that what we view as a miracle (interference in law) may be the fulfillment of a higher law that we have not yet understood. The world

we can see is a surrounded by a spiritual world we cannot see, and only dimly understand. Belief in the providence of God ought not to be confused with the arrogant assumption that providence must be used as we wish. With all the questions we may have, we pray with the confidence that God can mould events and people to fulfill God's own purpose.

In the background of this discussion is the issue of petition in prayer. Petition is among the primary tendencies within in us that lead us to pray. Yet, the modern, scientific view of the world becomes a hindrance to such prayer. We live in world of cause and effect. For many people, expecting God to change anything in answer to our request is absurd. Scientific measurements of the universe become increasingly precise. Where we have questions, where mysteries still confound us, we do not doubt that the answers will come through science. Such realities are true, whether dealing with other galaxies, or with our own earth. In fact, we can even look at the operations of our own bodies and minds and notice the operation of natural processes. Definite petitions to God seem absurd. For many people, communion with God grows difficult.

The Bible does not help us much with such difficulties. After all, just as the Bible assumes the existence of God, it assumes the element of petition in prayer. We can explain this reality by recognizing the difference between the biblical world and our own world. Yet, we need to recognize that not even the scientific view of the world is as predictable as we might like. We can use our knowledge of the laws of the universe to explain phenomena that seem unexplainable. We can use such knowledge to do things that do not seem possible. For example, why does some water run up hill? How can we make heavy substances float upon the water or fly through the air? We influence the

universe with our own will and personality. We can use such rules of nature, not simply obey them. They serve those who have the knowledge and will to use them. Too often, we think of cause and effect in the natural world as a rigid system. We need to appreciate the influence that our own will and purpose has molded and shaped natural laws. We have used our creativity and knowledge to effect massive changes upon the earth. We have made natural law the servant of personal will.

Such reflections may lead us to reflect upon the ways God may influence nature and events to move toward God's own purpose. We explain the operation of the universe and of history with increasing precision. Yet, we use such knowledge to our own purpose. Do we really mean to say that God is less free than we are to use the laws of the universe to God's own purpose? If this is true, then providence is possible. Though the Bible does not deal directly with this issue, we can share its confidence in the freedom of God to help people. God must not answer many prayers. There are no good prayers God cannot answer. God does not remake the world for the asking, not because God cannot, but because God must not. It may be convenient for us today that it does not rain, but that does not mean, in the great scheme of the universe, that it would be for God to abide by such a request. We can have confidence in the freedom and power of God. However, due humility will restrain us from making a presumptuous application of this truth to prayer. We need to pray about everything, in submission to the will of God. This is both more humane and more Christian than falsely limiting our prayers to what we might think permissible. Our faith is not in prayer in itself. However, prayer in faith asks everything in submission to the will of God. It desires never to force its wish on God. Rather, it seeks to align its wish with the will of God.

7. We encounter unanswered prayer.

The Bible has accounts of unanswered prayer. Moses prayed to enter the Promised Land. Note Lamentations 3:44 and Habbakkuk 1:2. Paul wanted his thorn in the flesh removed in II Corinthians 12:9. Even Jesus prayed for removal of suffering at Gethsemane. The Bible also recognizes that whole groups of people will experience lack of answered prayer. Note Isaiah 1:15, James 4:3, Job 27:8-9, Jeremiah 11:14.

Complaint about unanswered prayer is nothing new. Yet, it is unreasonable to allow such experiences to cause the abandoning of prayer. After all, much of the greatest praying is not petition at all. Think of prayers for adoration, confession, thanksgiving, consecration, and communion. Petition is only one aspect of the experience of prayer. Prayer is a gift of communion between God and us. Prayer brings transformation of us, even if we are disappointed in external results. Further, we are not wise enough to substitute our wish for the will of God. Imagine what the world would be like, if God answered all our requests positively. God must deny many of our prayers. No is as real an answer as Yes. Another reality is that we often fail to see how often God answers our prayers in ways that we do not expect. In fact, we may not even like the way God answers our prayer. Often, we seek a specific result in prayer. God often gives us an opportunity to be the channel for answered prayer. God may grant us wisdom sufficient to get what we request. We childishly look at prayer as a way to bypass the use of our own intelligence and work. Results come only as we think and work toward the desired end. Consider what this world would be like if prayer could accomplish everything. We jump to the conclusion that our prayer is unanswered. In reality, many of our greatest desires demand time, patience, persistent search, long waiting as conditions of their fulfillment. We too soon give up on a prayer as unanswered, when what we need is

patience and persistence. We are not ready for the reception of the gift that we desire. God cannot give to us until we are prepared and proved our spirit by persistent prayer. We become disappointed in not receiving that for which we ask. We measure the value of prayer by external changes. Yet, the saints of prayer knew that the value of prayer is determined more by entrusting ourselves to God. We who pray must be ready of have our requests denied. God looks at the desires of our hearts. God may not answer the specific request. Rather, God may answer only the desire of the heart.

8. Prayer is dominant desire.

We have spoken of prayer as a spiritual act. However, prayer is also the expression of human desire. Every wish, with God, is a prayer. In this sense, our wish may be good or evil. This recognition makes it clear that everyone prays. Prayer may be either heavenly or devilish. Prayer becomes the inward measure of our quality. The greater we are, the wider and deeper and finer are our desires. The prayer of dominant desire always tends to attain its object. This is true, in the first place, because a central craving organizes all the faculties of our lives about itself and sets mind and hands to do its bidding. Desire is the elemental force in human experience. Such prayer also calls us into alliance with forces from outside us. Prayer is costly. Prayer is hunger and thirst. Prayer is our demand on life, elevated, purified, and aware of the possibility of divine alliance.

We have dealt with unanswered prayer. However, we have not dealt with one of the greatest troubles in our praying. Our prayers are often unreal because they do not represent what in our inward hearts we sincerely crave. Our prayers are not true prayers at all. They do not represent our dominant desires. We ask God for the right specific result. We do not desire it deeply within our hearts. Prayer that is not dominant desire is too weak to achieve anything. We pray that a sinful habit removed, while at the same time not take the steps necessary to remove the habit from our lives. We may petition God for forgiveness, yet not take the steps necessary in genuine repentance. We may pray for our friends, yet they cannot count upon us to be sensitive and generous to them. Do we care about our friends at all? We may ask for great and noble things in prayer. Yet, if our character does not match that for which we pray, our prayer is not sincere. We may pray for missions, while at the same time offer nothing else that might aid Christian

mission. We may pray for peace, while at the same time not become devoted to the cause of peace in the human family. We retain prejudice against people of a different race or economic class.

9. Prayer is a battlefield.

For many people, prayer means rest and quiet. However, prayer is also a battlefield. When people say they have no time for prayer, they do not realize that it is deals with the most decisive business of life. We may take a relatively brief time of our day and devote it to prayer. Yet, that time becomes the most powerful moments we spend. When we hunger and thirst for God, we do so because we have a fight on our hands. The desire of our heart may be in line with the will of God. We must defeat the enemies we meet along the way. A fight is on in the life of everyone who desires what is great and good. The decisive part of this battle is not public. Rather, what we most need is a private victory, in those secret moments of our lives. Long before we struggle in public, we fought the battle in private all ready. The decisive battles are hidden. The outward conflicts are only an echo or a ripple of that more real and inward war. For the saints, prayer is the place where they conquered faith and reestablished confidence in God and in themselves. They struggled in prayer for right desire, which is the deepest need of character. The battlefield of prayer is where they fought the war against wrong desire. The saints fought the issue between the two conflicting motives that maser human life in prayer. That is, will praise of the world or the approval of God motivate them. They fought for the power to see and the courage to do the will of God.

Prayer is the innermost form of the fight for character. The most profound need of the world, from a purely secular standpoint, is clean, strong, devoted people. We need the fortitude to endure in the battles of life. We need the strength to deal with temptation. For example, people struggle against their anger, passion, or irreverence. Prayer is the inner battlefield where people often conquer most effectively the false worries, trivial anxieties, morbid deliberation and all the impure thoughts that irritate the spirit and make

the body ill. In prayer, we struggle for clear vision to see and strength to do the will of God.

10. Prayer is unselfish.

Of all the forces in human life that consist of forming our dominant desire, none is more powerful than love. The lack of a satisfying philosophy of prayer does not cause our prayers to become dry. Rather, lack of love will turn our prayer to dullness and dryness. Devotion to people and to causes has made dominant desire unselfish. We can pray for ourselves in unselfish ways. The ways our lives touch family, friends, and community make it clear that the happiness of others somewhat depends upon us. Our bad habits or wrong thoughts affect the lives of others. Nothing is simply a private affair. The evil we do privately creeps out into the world around us. Sinning, even in its most private forms, places poison into the public sphere. Eventually, everyone is the worse for the pollution. We do not carry the consequences of our sin alone.

Thoughtful Christians in their intercessions are about a serious and reasonable business. We start with two truths. First, the Christian gospel about God recognizes that God desires good for all people. God's love is boundless. We know God's purpose of good sweeps through creation. In our prayers, we desire God to carry us along as God works out this grand plan. The second truth is that intimate relationships make the world of persons a community rather than an individual part. Life binds us together as a whole. In this system of love flowing between persons, we place our dominant desire along side that of God. No one can easily set boundaries to the influence of this kind of prayer.

Some people claim that the psychological benefits of prayer are all that we have. This does not lessen the value of intercession. Rather, it elevates prayer for others. We cannot understand it all, but we know that we do something creative when we carry the burden of others in prayer. Intercessory prayer involves placing ourselves alongside God in an urgent, creative outpouring of sacrificial love. Such prayer is love on its knees.

The primary obstacle to intercession is moral. We live for what we can get. Our dominant desires are selfish. Often, we give lip service to our prayer for others. We pray as hypocrites. If our prayers mean little to us, what do they mean to God? If we took away all the intellectual problems related to praying for others, would we then pray? Alternatively, would we still refuse to pray for others out of our failure to love enough? Intercession is the result of generous devotion, not logical analysis. We pray as much as we desire. We desire as much as we love.

Jesus prayed for others: children, the sick, his disciples, his enemies, laborers for the harvest, the whole community. The knowledge that others are praying for us is one of the finest and most empowering influences that can surround anyone. When trust in God and love for others co-exist in any of us, prayer for others inevitably follows. Genuine intercessors have felt that they were not playing with a toy. They knew they were using the creative power of God and opening ways for God to work God's will. They were convinced that their prayers brought consequences for others.

Consider the power of prayer to renew us for service. Are we not often shallow in our service and superficial in our influence largely because we do not escape the crowd long enough for the ministry of unselfish praying alone? Allow me to illustrate. A friend or acquaintance comes to us for aid. They share their emptiness. In that moment, we experience the poverty of our own lives. We are barren, useless in this moment, not equipped to share with another in need. We are not alone. We are part of a community. Take from our lives the gifts we receive from family, friends, acquaintances, work, cultural influences, we could see how small is the territory of our lives alone. We are not separable from the larger social body of which we are members. The Lord's Prayer

begins with the words, “Our Father . . .” In solitude, we are not alone. We pray with an awareness of community. Every relationship is a live-wire connection between one life and another. Prayer at its best refuses the impossible task of separating the “I” from the “we.” We carry the common needs of humanity to God. We thank God for the blessings we experience as a community. We repent of communal sins. We strive for social justice and peace. We pray for the victory of Christ in human affairs. Praying for another is wonderful. To do so in secret, and to do so with sincerity, one must truly care. Praying with others is an intimate and penetrating a test of our live of prayer. We heal personal relationships through prayer with others. The need for kindness and forgiveness and loyalty become real.