

# 5 Misconceptions That Hinder Prayer

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by Richard J. Foster *Discipleship Journal* Issue #80 March/April 1994

We yearn for prayer and hide from prayer. We believe we should do it—we even want to do it—but something stands between us and actually praying. What keeps us from enjoying prayer as a love relationship with God?

## **Prayer means talking.**

This is perhaps the most basic misconception people have about prayer—that it means telling God what we want. Prayer, in fact, is interaction. You can find illustrations throughout the Bible, from Adam and Eve through the Book of Revelation, of the kind of interchange that goes on in prayer.

American Christians have a deep need to understand and learn the listening dynamic of this interchange. Kierkegaard said, "A man prayed, and at first he thought the prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer was listening." Fénelon wrote about the need to silence and still all creaturely activity so that we can hear the Divine whisper. Prayer is being able to respond to the voice of God.

Evangelicals are perhaps more accustomed to God speaking to us through the Scriptures. And that's good—it's the primary means by which God speaks to His children. Yet God speaks in many ways. We need to learn to listen for His voice. Normally, His voice is not audible ... but I wouldn't want to exclude that possibility. Who am I to say how God will choose to speak?

Prayer is mainly listening. It is the interaction, the dialogue, the interchange between two individuals. It's talking with God and hearing from God about what God and I are doing together.

## **Prayer cannot be learned.**

Some people think that prayer is a gift—you either have it or you don't. Look at the Christian colleges in our country and see how many of them have courses in prayer. This is because we don't believe prayer is something to learn.

We also show that we think prayer cannot be learned when we're not willing to risk making mistakes. Yet that's the way you learn anything. That's the way little children learn how to walk—they fall down. That's the way Edison learned how to make the first lightbulb—through the many thousands of experiments that didn't work.

Prayer *is* something to learn. "Lord, teach us to pray." And we can grow in skill at hearing from God and interacting with God and receiving more faith. We can grow in prayer.

## **Prayer is complicated.**

In one sense, prayer *is* complicated. How can a finite human spirit be in communion with the infinite Spirit of the universe? It would burn out the circuits of our minds to understand it.

But in another sense, prayer is incredibly simple. God answers prayer because His children ask.

As I mentioned in my book *Prayer*, just as a little child cannot draw a bad picture, a child of God cannot utter a bad prayer. God is pleased with our desire to come to Him. The accuser might say, "That's a

terrible prayer. The grammar is bad; it's egocentric. It's wrongheaded." But I think God says, "That's My child. He's chosen to come and be with Me. She's chosen to be in My presence. It's a beautiful prayer." God receives it. It's not complicated.

I love Jean Pierre de Caussade's description of the simplicity of prayer: "The soul, light as a feather, fluid as water, innocent as a child, responds to every movement of grace like a floating balloon." The ability to move with every movement of grace as the Spirit comes—that's what prayer is about.

### **Prayer is grim duty.**

Prayer *can* be hard work. But I also think that people need to see prayer as a delight, as joyful interaction with a loving God.

I remember one time when I was vacationing near a beach in Oregon. I got up early and went out on the beach just as it was beginning to get light.

I remember just walking along and saying really loud, "This is beautiful." And I sensed a response, as if God were saying, "I know; I made it." I thought, *Whoa!* And then I said, "Thank You, Lord." I sensed God saying, "You're welcome!" And I thought again, *Whoa!* God was there!

This unusually strong sense of a dialogue lasted about an hour and a half. I decided to ask God some questions I'd always had. I was very intense in those days, and I was really worried about what I wore as a sign of witness to gospel truth. I wondered whether a white-shirt-and-tie mentality contradicted the concept of Christian simplicity. So I asked God what I should wear. And it was like God laughed and said, "Oh, Foster, would you quit trying to be so blasted religious and wear whatever you want?" That gave me great freedom.

We have a heritage that labels a person as deeply spiritual if he says, "For the first hour I struggled, and the second hour nothing happened. But the third hour I broke through to God." We read books on prayer and get loaded down with guilt, thinking something is wrong with us if we don't agonize over prayer.

We need to recognize that there is also the need for lightness in prayer. It's an occupational hazard of religious people to get too serious.

### **God is remote and inaccessible.**

On a practical level, many people are deists. To them, God is far away. Yet, the gospel teaches very clearly that God is near.

When Jesus said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," it was not a way of saying, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has almost come, but it didn't quite make it." Instead, His meaning was the same as if I were to say to you as we're walking down the street, "Behold, the restaurant is at hand. Let's eat." That's the idea. "It's drawn near to you; it's come nigh," He said. "It's even in your midst. It's right here."

God is near; the Kingdom of the heavenlies has come. Jesus' miracles demonstrated the presence of the Kingdom; the nearness of God. God is no longer remote; God is right among His people. What does *Immanuel* mean? God is with us. He is still present. And we can rejoice in the presence of God.