

PRAYER

SEEKING THE WILL OF CHRIST

What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also.
— APOSTLE PAUL, *1 Corinthians 14:15*

We need discipline of thought for prayer and prayer for discipline of thought. Strictly speaking prayer is not properly a supply, it is an act of worship in the express dependence of the creature upon the Creator. But in as much as prayer is an act of worship by faith, so prayer does affect our minds.

What is earnest prayer but the heart laying hold of heaven, the mind communicating to its Maker, and the soul expressing its utter dependence upon its Savior? Are these not healthy habits of the mind? Do these practices not characterize the highest use of the mind? What better exercise of the heart can there be than to direct focused attention on God? What healthier routine could the mind practice than this?

The Word of God serves to impress the mind; prayer serves to express the mind. God opens His mind to us in the Scripture; we open our minds to Him in prayer. This is how Puritan George Swinnock puts it, “Prayer is a humble lifting up the heart, or pouring out the soul to God in the name of Christ; it is a crying, Abba, Father! As Scripture is God’s letter, wherein he openeth his mind to man, so prayer is man’s letter, wherein he openeth his mind to God.”¹ These two, Scripture and prayer, are most essential to all other spiritual disciplines (Acts 6:4).

We need discipline of thought for prayer and prayer for discipline of thought. These principles will constitute the two segments of this chapter.

DISCIPLINE OF THOUGHT FOR PRAYER

In the Scriptures God speaks to us; in prayer we speak to God. We need God to speak to us before we speak to Him. Of this, we should be mindful.

Jonathan Edwards explains both the mind’s dependence on and excuse for negligence of prayer:

¹ George Swinnock, *The Works of George Swinnock*, (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1868), 1:107.

Conversation between God and mankind in this world, is maintained by God's word on his part, and by prayer on ours. By the former, he speaks and expresses his mind to us; by the latter, we speak and express our minds to him. Sincere friendship towards God, in all who believe him to be properly an intelligent, willing being, does most apparently, directly, and strongly incline to prayer; and it no less disposes the heart strongly to desire to have our infinitely glorious and gracious Friend expressing his mind to us by his word, that we may know it. The same light which has directed the nations of the world in general to prayer, has directed them to suppose, that God, or the gods, have revealed themselves to men. And we see, that the same infidelity that disposes men to deny any divine revelation, disposes them to reject as absurd the duty of prayer.²

Thomas Manton connects our mind's use of prayer to our mind's love of God:

If we do not delight in communion with him, we do not honour him as the chiefest good. Friends love to be often in one another's company, and certainly 'it is good to draw nigh to God,' to preserve an acquaintance between him and us. He hath appointed his ordinances, the word and prayer, which are as it were a dialogue and interchangeable discourse between God and the creature. In the word he speaketh to us, and in prayer we speak unto him. He conveyeth his mind in the word, and we ask his grace in prayer. In prayer we make the request, and in the word we have God's answer. Well, then, when men neglect public or private prayer, or opportunities of hearing, they are guilty of ungodliness. So far they break off communion with God, especially if they neglect prayer, which is a duty to be done at all times—a sweet diversion which the soul enjoyeth with God in private, a duty which answereth to the daily sacrifice. Therefore the neglect of prayer is made to be a branch of atheism, Ps. 14:3, 4. When men are loath to come into God's presence, out of a love to ease and carnal pleasures, and care not if God and they grow strange, or seldom hear from one another, it is a great evil. Our comfort and peace dependeth much upon frequent access to God.³

STEWARDED THE PRIVILEGE

A vast and awe-inspiring view of God demands that we prepare our minds before we rush in and utter a single thought. It is healthy for the mind to have regular engagements of this magnitude. We should not pass over the reality of prayer too quickly; it is the inconceivable privilege wherein our mind directly communicates to our Holy Maker.

If the mind is rightly exercised in speaking to God, it will most certainly become acquainted with the deepening gratitude that accompanies such privilege. Prayer, then, always ministers to the mind, even indirectly. So when we pray we should first be mindful that we have been invited to have an audience with the One who is high and lifted-up, the One who is infinite in majesty, authority, power, and dominion. While our primary purpose here is to gain a deeper appreciation of how God's gift of prayer is an indispensable means for the health of our minds, we begin by acknowledging that prior to prayer we must think rightly.

² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 486.

³ Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 5 (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1871), 139.

Isn't this a conundrum—a catch-twenty-two? Are we saying that the mind is important for right prayer and right prayer is important for the mind? Answer: Yes. How can both be necessary at the same time? Which one comes first? Answer: Regeneration. Regeneration creates a mind capable of rightly expressing itself to the Father through Christ by the Spirit. Prayer is God's gift of an immediate line of dependency through which the newborn heart cries, "Abba Father!" So if that regenerate heart is to continue in healthy growth, it must continue the cycle of taking in nourishment from God (by Scripture) while continually crying out to Him (in prayer) in increasing maturity with requests of increasing excellence. As both food and the labor to acquire food are necessary, so both a Godward mind and the exercise of prayer are necessary. John Owen explained these principles well when he wrote:

Wherefore, words proper, suggested by the Spirit of God, and taken either directly or analogically out of the Scripture, do help the mind and enlarge it with supplications. ... The use of such words, being first led unto by the desires of the mind, may and doth lead the mind on to express its farther desires also, and increaseth those which are so expressed. It is from God's institution and blessing that the mind and will of praying do lead unto the words of prayer, and the words of prayer do lead on the mind and will, enlarging them in desires and supplications. And without this aid many would oftentimes be straitened in acting their thoughts and affections towards God, or distracted in them, or diverted from them.⁴

We are assuming the basic biblical understanding that prayer is an essential means for the seeking of God's grace. And the regenerate mind is in constant need of God's grace to grow in thinking that make much of Christ. When the mind is faced with temptation and must fight, prayer is one of its most powerful weapons. Prayer, then, must be prioritized by the mind both for our minds and for our prayers (Proverbs 15:8; 1 Peter 3:7).

Our prayers often suffer because the devotion of our minds suffer. Andrew Murray noted that "The whole difficulty is that we wish to pray in the Spirit and at the same time walk after the flesh." In other words, we wish to pray in the Spirit with undisciplined minds. This is an ancient problem. John Cassian (A.D. 360-432) describes the importance of the discipline of the mind for the sake of our prayers:

Whatever the mind has been thinking about before it prays will certainly come to it while it is praying. ... The mind is conditioned by its recent state. In prayer, the mind remembers recent acts or thoughts and experiences, sees them dancing before it like ghosts. And this annoys us, or depresses us, or reminds us of past lust or past worry, or makes us (I am ashamed to say) laugh like fools at some absurdity or circumstance, or go over again some recent conversation. Whatever we do not want to creep into our time of prayer, we must try to keep out of the heart when we are not praying. St. Paul's words were, "Pray without ceasing," and "In every place lifting up pure hands without wrath or controversy." To obey this is impossible, unless the mind is purified from sin, is given to virtue as its natural good and is continually nourished by the contemplation of God.⁵

⁴ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 330-331.

⁵ Conferences 9.3.3, cited by Peter Gorday, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 164.

THE WONDERING MIND

Kris Lundgaard has rightly said that “the flesh works by deceit and that its primary target is the believer’s mind.”⁶ Because prayer is one of the most destructive weapons against temptation, it is often one of the first to be sabotaged from within. So we have to know not only that we must pray for the mind, but how to keep from being tricked out of praying with the mind.

“For though we walk in the flesh,” says Scripture, “we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:3–5). Again, we are told, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). This spiritual warfare demands the discipline of the mind. Our supply must be the word of God and prayer. We are called to take up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance” (Ephesians 6:17-18)—this means discipline. So whether it is the flesh or demonic forces, the use of our minds for prayer is crucial.

William Gurnall says, “If [the devil] can, he will keep thee from prayer. If that be not feasible, he will strive to interrupt thee in prayer.”⁷ Thomas Boston warns:

Wandering thoughts in prayer mar many prayers. They come on like the fowls on the carcase, and will devour it, if not driven away. A carnal frame of heart is the mother of them, and rash indeliberate approaches to God help them forward. In that case one should be like the builders of the wall, having the trowel in the one hand, and the sword in the other, resolutely to resist vain thoughts, and refuse to harbour them. Nay, turn the cannon on the enemy, consider them as affording new matter of humiliation, and a clamant occasion of plying the throne of grace more closely. If they be striven against, they will not mar your acceptance; but if not they will.⁸

“Slightness and irreverence, or want of a sense of God’s presence” is what Thomas Manton identified as the root failure of the mind in its use of prayer. He goes on to write:

A careless spirit will surely wander; but one deeply affected is fixed and intent. Jonah, when he prayed in the whale’s belly, could he have an heart to forget his work? Daniel, when he prayed among the lions, could he mind anything else? When we are serious and pray in good earnest, we will call in all our thoughts, and hold them under command. This question was put to Basil, how a man should keep the mind free from distraction? His answer was ... that this evil came from slightness of heart, and unbelief of God’s presence;

⁶ Kris Lundgaard, *The Enemy Within*, 70.

⁷ William Gurnall, *A Treatise of The Whole Armour of God* (London: Printed by John Beale, 1637).

⁸ Thomas Boston, 535-36.

for if a man did believe that God were before his eyes, searching the heart, and trying the reins, he would be serious.⁹

William Gurnall adds to this warning:

Possess thy heart with a reverential awe of God's majesty and holiness. ... shall thy idle words in prayer not be accounted for? And are not those idle words that come from a lazy heart, a sleepy heart, that minds not what it says? What procured Nadab and Abihu so sudden and strange an death? Was it not their strange incense? And is not this strange praying, when thy mind is a stranger to what thy lips utter? Behave thyself thus to thy prince if thou darest. Let thy hand reach a petition to him, and thine eye look or thy tongue talk to another; would he not command this clown, or rather madman, to be taken from before him?¹⁰

So as a matter of order we recognize that the mind must assert itself in its use of prayer for the sake of its prayers. The mind must recognize the need to pray, it must believe that God cares and is ready to answer the cries of His children at any moment, and it must value the grace of God over its own ability and strength. However spiritually weak one may be at any given moment, his mind must be disciplined to turn to God with whatever strength he possesses to call upon God for the strength his mind does not possess. The first principle is that discipline of mind is key to the discipline of prayer.

PRAYER FOR DISCIPLINE OF THOUGHT

We have urged that the great lack of godliness among Christians today is largely owing to a lack of mind-discipline, but we must confess that one of the main reasons for this lack is quite simply prayerlessness. Stephen Charnock gets straight to the point when he writes, "If thou thinkest God does not mind thee, why dost thou pray at all? If thou thinkest he does mind thee, why dost thou not pray more fervently, fixedly?"¹¹ Our aim is not to incite guilt over our neglect of prayer, but we must be honest with ourselves: we cannot expect a God-honoring thought-life without a God-honoring prayer-life.

We must not only use our minds to pray, we must pray for the use of our minds. The great goal is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). Our most responsible prayers, then, are those that seek to glorify God by His grace in the use of our minds. We must pray for our minds.

If the use of the mind to prepare for and participate in prayer is rare, praying for the discipline of the mind is still rarer. Again, this is not a study on prayer. It is not a meditation on the importance, principles, or value of prayer—though that is a most worthy

⁹ Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 5 (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1871), 451.

¹⁰ William Gurnall, *A Treatise of The Whole Armour of God* (London: Printed by John Beale, 1637).

¹¹ Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864–1866), 494.

endeavor. It is not so much a consideration of how to discipline yourself for prayer, but how prayer is an indispensable means for the discipline of the mind.

PRAYER FOR THE MIND

Scripture is full of prayer for the mind. David cries out, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (Psalm 19:14). Likewise, Psalm 104:34 prays, “May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.” Other prayers include: “The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distresses” (Psalm 25:17); “Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and my mind” (Psalm 26:2); “I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart” (Psalm 38:8); “Reproaches have broken my heart, so that I am in despair” (Psalm 69:20); “let me meditate in my heart” (Psalm 77:6); “Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name” (Psalm 86:11); “Remember, O Lord, how your servants are mocked, and how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations” (Psalm 89:50); “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12); “When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul” (Psalm 94:19); “My heart is struck down like grass and has withered; I forget to eat my bread” (Psalm 102:4); “For I am poor and needy, and my heart is stricken within me” (Psalm 109:22); “With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!” (Psalm 119:10); “I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart!” (Psalm 119:32); “Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart” (Psalm 119:34); “I entreat your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise” (Psalm 119:58); “May my heart be blameless in your statutes, that I may not be put to shame!” (Psalm 119:80); “With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O LORD! I will keep your statutes” (Psalm 119:145); “O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me” (Psalm 131:1); “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!” (Psalm 139:23); “Do not let my heart incline to any evil” (Psalm 141:4). Paul prays for the mind when says, “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (Ephesians 1:18). Indeed, Scripture is full of prayer for the mind. A. W. Tozer summarized this point best when he wrote,

The best way to control our thoughts is to offer the mind to God in complete surrender. The Holy Spirit will accept it and take control of it immediately. Then it will be relatively easy to think on spiritual things, especially if we train our thought by long periods of daily prayer. Long practice in the art of mental prayer will help to form the habit of holy thought.

Matthew Henry exhorts us accordingly, “We should pray to God for a sound mind, that we may have spiritual senses exercised (Hebrews 5:14). Many have knowledge who have little judgment; those who have both are well fortified against the snares of Satan and well

furnished for the service of God and their generation.”¹² Richard Baxter urges us, “Pray constantly as you are able, for a willing mind, and yielding, inclinable heart to Christ.”¹³ Elsewhere, he says, “Above all pray and labour for a truly humble mind, that is well acquainted with its own defects; and fear and fly from a proud, overvaluing of your own understanding.”¹⁴ David modelled these principles for us. He earnestly prayed, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). Prayer is vital to a right and useful mind.

PRAYER AS THE MIND’S WEAPON

The power of the mind’s use of prayer lies in its ability to expose the secret workings of sin, which proves crucial to the discipline of the mind for the sake of loving God.

First, the word of God presses in on the mind and then the mind cries out for grace. This is the sequence observed in Hebrews 4: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ... Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrew 4:12, 16).

TAKE HOLD OF GOD

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you” (Isaiah 64:7). Matthew Henry remind us:

But when we take hold of God it is as the boatman with his hook takes hold on the shore, as if he would pull the shore to him, but really it is to pull himself to the shore; so we pray, not to bring God to our mind, but to bring ourselves to him. Those that would take hold of God in prayer so as to prevail with him must stir up themselves to do it; all that is within us must be employed in the duty (and all little enough), our thoughts fixed and our affections flaming.¹⁵

FIRST USE OF THE MIND

Our first use of the mind is always best when it seeks God. As the Psalmist declares, “I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in your words. My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promise” (Psalm 119:147–148). Matthew Henry comments on this passage with wise words: “That he began the day with God. The first thing he did in the morning, before he admitted any business, was to pray, when his

¹² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 919.

¹³ Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, vol. 9 (London: James Duncan, 1830), 134–135.

¹⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, vol. 15 (London: James Duncan, 1830), 182.

¹⁵ Henry, 1211.

mind was most fresh and in the best frame. If our first thoughts in the morning be of God they will help to keep us in his fear all the day long.”¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

The entire day receives order and discipline when it acquires unity. This unity must be sought and found in morning prayer. It is confirmed in work. The morning prayer determines the day. Squandered time of which we are ashamed, temptations to which we succumb, weaknesses and lack of courage in work, disorganization and lack of discipline in our thoughts and in our conversation with other men all have their origin most often in the neglect of morning prayer.¹⁷

In the morning, which starts my day with my mind set on God. At every meal, which reminds my mind of my utter dependency on God; my ill-desert of His manifold graces, that I am no more worthy to receive from the abundance of this land than those who are starving and without; my need for nutrients, health, and strength; my need to acknowledge His grace in daily provision and for my every portion; my need to meditate on all such gifts that I may be all the more grateful with a mind full of thanksgiving; my need to be a good steward of all that God gives, that my mind would be disciplined to be diligent in watching over my thoughts, words, desires, and actions. Throughout the day, at various promptings and situations. And finally, before I retire to sleep in the evening, which calms my heart and sets my mind at peace.

REMEMBER THE SPIRIT HELPS IN OUR WEAKNESS

By the grace of God, we need not fear that our prayers are entirely dependent on the quality of our thoughts. For even when our minds are weak, Christ is strong. Therefore, we take great encouragement in His promise: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

May we steward prayer so that our minds may more dearly love God. Let us heed the divine word: “But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20).

¹⁶ Henry, 926.

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted by Ken Curtis, “A Spiritual Tonic,” *Christian History Magazine-Issue 32: Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian in Nazi Germany*. Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1991.