

# The Spiritual Life

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## CHAPTER 12

### Prayer and the Word of God

In the spiritual life it is not enough for a person to carefully avoid temptations, vices, and sins. It is the duty of a man living in communion with God to progress in the race, to confirm and promote his spiritual standing, and to bring his sanctification to completion in the fear of God. Many things are involved in a person's progress in the spiritual life, and we have already considered many foundational matters. We have seen how God in His grace gives to believers a knowledge of spiritual things, prudence of judgment, the ability to pray, the appreciation for preaching, the capacity to moderate their affections and to pursue good works. In this chapter I want to consider in detail the means of promoting sanctification, which consists particularly in the purity of one's affections and actions: "Since we have such promises, dear ones, let us purify ourselves from all uncleanness of the flesh and the spirit, perfecting sanctification in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1); "Not that I have already achieved or become perfect, but I seek to take hold even as I have been taken hold of," to which he adds, "forgetting what is behind I focus on what is before me" (Phil. 3:12–13). He reaches forth with his full attention on the things which are in front of him: "Meditate on these things. Give yourself to them so that your progress might be manifest to everyone" (1 Tim. 4:15; cf. 2 Peter 1:5).

As we consider what Scripture teaches about our sanctification, we will begin with the following presupposition about all the saints on this earth. Though Christians are regenerated by divine grace, even when they have been solidly confirmed in their faith by much practice, none of them attains to such a stage of perfection that they may dare

to glory of being freed from all sin and vice or of having arrived at the spiritual summit. Indeed, nowhere in the Word of God is the stage of perfection for saints in this life defined or set forth. Rather, each has the duty to strive and stretch toward the summit.

Among the saints both in Old and New Testament times [*œconomiae*] there have been outstanding persons, utterly filled with the Spirit of God, upright men, consecrated to God, and devoted to divine matters by long practice who have made great progress toward holiness and spiritual perfection. But who can persuade himself (mindful of his human condition and weakness) that he has attained to that state which Paul himself denies ever having attained? Continual experience in this life confirms what the Lord's apostle says clearly: "We all stumble in many things" (James 3:2). If we measure the purity of our actions in the presence of God, how difficult it is in the business of our lives to regulate just our tongues so as not to sin with our words! How truly difficult it is to control the direction of the internal thoughts of our minds so that they are not besmirched by any vanity, lust, or sinful affection so that we can offer them to God as pure sacrifices.

Furthermore, we sin not only by commission but by omission. The duties that each person has toward God and toward neighbor depend on one's circumstances. These demand such careful attention and continual vigilance that who without arrogance can say, "I am pure and there is no iniquity with me" (Job 33:9)? Job comes close to speaking in this way, but even he does not claim the perfection we are speaking of. Indeed, none of the saints is so keen-sighted so as to perceive all his faults (Ps. 19:13). All of us fall short in our duties. We all have very many flaws and defects, both accomplished Christians and beginners. The greatest among us is the one who seeks to purge himself from all impurity of the flesh and to progress daily in true sanctification. He employs the necessary *means* that serve this purpose. Though almost everyone knows what they are, it is beneficial to review them.

As is proper, I put *prayer* in the first place among the means of promoting sanctification: that most holy exercise by which the godly soul joins itself to God, ascends to God as by stairs to heaven itself, and (as from a flowing watercourse) draws for itself divine grace. Surely there is no more glorious exercise for a man (who is mortal, ashes and dust,

a sinner from the womb) than to dare appear before the very throne of God on the basis of the divine grace that is offered to him in Christ Jesus, by the merit of His obedience and the support of His intercession. In prayer the believer both brings his requests to God with confidence as to a good father and joins in the choirs of the angels to celebrate the mighty works and the benefits that he has received from God's divine majesty. I understand *prayer* in a broad way. It refers to everything we communicate to God. This includes our petitions for the good things necessary for this life and for piety, our appeals for God to avert the threat of bad things, our intercessions for others, our thanksgivings for the benefits He has bestowed, and our glorifying and celebrating the divine excellencies, perfections, grandeur, and majesty. Such is the teaching of the apostle in 1 Timothy 2:1 and Philippians 4:6.

The holy exercise of prayer makes up the first part of rational religion (which is to say *spiritual* religion), and it is not only recommended but indeed commanded throughout Scripture as the means of perfecting and completing our sanctification. Prayer is recommended by our conscience and demanded by our needs. We could almost say that apart from this means of prayer there is no grace that God communicates to human beings. The Lord opens to the one who knocks. He is found by the one who seeks. The first of all things the Holy Spirit teaches a person by secret grace is this very thing: to knock and to seek. Such is the first spiritual movement of a person who has been alienated from God. The response of prayer opens the door to communion with Him (cf. Matt. 7:7; Luke 18:1–14; 1 Thess. 5:17; James 5:13).

There are various types of prayer. Public prayers are spoken to God in the assemblies of the saints. Domestic prayers are the appointed times that the head of the household leads. Private prayers are when each person by himself worshipfully honors God and asks for His strength and His grace. We can also speak about our fixed and ordinary prayers (carried out in the presence of God at certain set times of the day such as morning and evening or also midday, as was the practice of the ancients; see Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10) and our extraordinary prayers. These occasional prayers are when a person is persuaded to pray from his pressing need or a strong sense of the benefits he has received from God and casts himself on God as the Holy Spirit stirs up good and

noble feelings in his mind. With regard to private prayer in particular, I have in mind those times when the godly soul exercises the freest relations and most intimate commerce with God, experiencing the large influences of His grace.

Prayers, made with requisite devotion and in keeping with scriptural principles, are the most useful means for promoting sanctification because they never lack effect if they are offered in accordance with the will of God. It is a characteristic of God to "hear prayer" (Ps. 65:2). The Lord Jesus emphasized the importance and effectiveness of prayer as did the apostles after Him: "But I say to you, ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For whoever asks receives; and whoever seeks finds; and whoever knocks, it will be opened to him" (Luke 11:9–10); "Truly, truly I say to you, whatever you ask My Father in My name He will give to you" (John 16:23); "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask it from God who without reproach gives generously to all" (James 1:5).

Prayers, supplications, and thanksgivings poured out before God from a sincere heart have an excellent effect on a person's spiritual life. They mold and dispose the soul toward all kinds of good affections and praiseworthy actions. Nearness to God sanctifies the soul. A person is never nearer to God than when in prayer he rises up from earth to heaven and stands before the very presence of His throne. Speaking to God in prayer, a person holds intimate communication and exercises a secret commerce with Him. As you pray you are sanctified through nearness and communion with the glory of God, even as the face of Moses shone after he had spoken with God (Ex. 29:43; 34:29). You feel and experience that it is "good...to draw near to God" (Ps. 73:28). Your thoughts are purified. Your love for God is stirred up. You are led to contemplate His glory. Your mind is drawn away from earthly and perishable things and inspired to nobly seek out and generously expend itself for the great things that please God. You are able to calm yourself and restrain vain lusts and the rush of turbulent affections. In sum, a light extends through your mind and sets it aflame for the cultivation of all godliness and every virtue.

But if prayers and praises to God are to produce such salutary effects, one must perform them in accordance with the will of God

and the rule of the heavenly sanctuary. It is not as though any prayer offered is automatically pleasing to God. The Holy Spirit in Malachi 2:3 calls the prayers of ungodly, impure, and hypocritical people "dung." Isaiah calls them an "abomination" (Isa. 1:13). Even those who are in communion with God and the church can pray improperly and "ask amiss," as James 4:3 reminds us. There is an art to praying well that can only be learned in the school of the saints. "And this is the confidence that we have with God, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He listens to us" (1 John 5:14). This art, so different from those that can be attained through human brilliance and cultivation, is set forth in the precepts of Christ Jesus, the examples of the saints, and by spiritual prudence. The apostles understood this well and so asked the Lord Jesus to teach it to them (Luke 11:1).

A detailed discussion of prayer is not possible here. There are, of course, well-known principles about prayer that I cannot develop, such as the importance of the interior attitude and disposition of the one who would engage in this spiritual duty (i.e., that prayers must be offered from a pure heart and pure hands—that is, with no evil clinging to hands or thoughts). One must pray in faith, in the name of Christ Jesus, with filial trust (the confidence of a child before his father), with a reverent attitude, without hypocrisy, without showiness, and in spirit and truth. Also, our prayers must be adapted to the promises of grace that God has made to us: we are to ask nothing but what God wants us to ask. That is, we are to ask only what He has promised.

Taking for granted such basic matters, I would like to write briefly about a particular kind of private prayer, when a person closes the door and directs himself to God in friendly intercourse and familiar exchange, as the Lord said in Matthew 6:6, "But when you would pour out prayers, enter into your chamber and close the door. Pray in secret to your Father, and your Father who sees you in secret will reward you openly."

The first thing necessary in this type of praying is that the person should set forth all his needs frankly and intimately before God, just as they are, with proper reverence and submission, not concealing anything. In the school of the saints, this is called "pouring out the heart," laying out one's mind entirely in the presence of God. "O you people,

pour out your heart before His face!" (Ps. 62:8; cf. Ps. 42:4; Isa. 26:16). The godly soul, alone with God and regarding Him as a caring father, comes humbly before His throne and takes no great care with what words to speak or the arrangement of what to say (as one must do in public prayers) other than that which easily comes to mind. He simply prays, humbly and with confidence, using whatever words his own affections suggest as he is standing before God. Does his supplication require a confession of his sins? The believing soul will not be silent, lie, or cover his faults (Ps. 32:5). He will not justify or minimize his wrongdoings but fully and frankly set them forth before God with all his heart. In his requests, he will tell God his every need and lack, all the pressing circumstances he finds himself in, his temptations, dangers, and fears. He asks God what he should seek or not seek, and what he should prioritize for the glory of God, the public good, or his own benefit. Even though the heavenly Father knows all these things, He wants to be asked before He responds. He loves to see childlike confidence in His people, the filial affection characteristic of His own.

The second thing necessary is that these prayers should be poured forth ardently and seriously, not weakly and carelessly. "The effective prayer of a just person is very strong" (James 5:16)—that is, a prayer expressed with focus and zeal. No one among mortals is exempt from having his inward state of mind influenced by a diversity of affections that impact what he does, including his spiritual activities. It is not always possible to say with the holy man in Psalm 57:7, "My heart is prepared, O God, my heart is prepared. I will sing and give praise." The lessening of zeal and focus, as often happens in prayer, may arise from one's temperament, a lack of divine grace, or from sinful emotions and dispositions that stifle and repress a person's appreciation and desire for spiritually good things. But wherever this weakness and carelessness of spirit stems from, everyone should realize that to get an answer from God he should pray for it zealously and seriously. James reminds us of the same thing: "Let him ask in faith without hesitating" (James 1:6)—that is, not uncertainly or in a doubtful or unfocused frame of mind. He must ask ardently and in such a way that it is obvious that he is persuaded of the urgency and necessity of the good thing that he wants to gain from God.

The third and final thing I want to underline about prayer is that when we are praying and making supplications (assuming we are doing so in good conscience and for good things necessary for our condition), we must be insistent with God; we must not give up making request of Him until He has answered our prayers. This is beautifully expressed in Luke 18:1, where the Lord told a parable, "that it was necessary to pray always and not to grow sluggish." Such is the teaching of the apostle in 1 Thessalonians 5:17: "Pray without stopping." Paul illustrated this doctrine with his own example, as he often remarks in his letters (Col. 1:9; 2 Thess. 1:3).

This kind of opportunity, incessantly continuing in a petition, might seem inappropriate with fellow humans. If a person has been denied two or three times but continues to insist and repeat his request, he might be considered shameless, lacking in honor and civility. But the reception hall of the court of heaven does not take it so. It is proper not only to pray but to plead, to demand, to request insistently and continually, even as a beggar does. This is not displeasing but pleasing to God. When God puts off responding to His people's first and second requests, He is provoking them to more ardent prayers and deeper desires. He tests and uncovers the internal affections of their minds and persuades them of their great need and misery. And He confirms and strengthens their trust in His grace, goodness, and paternal care for His own. The remarkable example of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:22–28 underlines this. She turned her initial sharp rejection by Christ to her own advantage. The holy man prayed in this attitude: "O LORD, God of my salvation, I cry to You by day, and my prayer is before You at night" (Ps. 88:1); "Continue tenaciously in prayer; be attentive in it as you give thanks" (Col. 4:2); As Peter was in prison, "prayer was made for him by the church intensely and tenaciously to God" (Acts 12:5); Cornelius was "a devout man...who assiduously interceded with God in supplications" (Acts 10:2). If you seek divine grace in this way, if you implore His strength, and if you insistently press your case while prostrate before His throne, you will triumph. Through prayer you will receive a hearing. You will overcome, and by assaulting and wrestling after the example of your father Jacob, you will conquer the unconquerable One.

We will now consider the second means for strengthening and promoting sanctification and the spiritual life: *reading, meditation, and ruminations* on the Word: “My Spirit which is upon you and My words which I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants’ descendants,” says the LORD, ‘from this time and forever’” (Isa. 59:21); “Your words were brought to me, and I ate them. And Your words were the joy and happiness of my heart” (Jer. 15:16); “Let the word of Christ dwell in your hearts with all wisdom” (Col. 3:16); “And from boyhood you have known the sacred Scriptures which can bring you wisdom for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15; cf. Isa. 34:16; John 5:39; Acts 17:2; 2 Peter 1:19; Rev. 1:3).

It seems to me that this holy exercise can be considered in two ways: either as a duty to which all are called by God’s command or as a very useful means for promoting the spiritual life. Here I focus on the latter. The reading of God’s Word is a means for illuminating our minds, for growing in knowledge and wisdom, for strengthening our faith and hope, for promoting our sanctification, for purging our affections, for gaining comfort and consolation, and for directing all our actions with true spiritual prudence. These are among the many purposes for which the Word of God has been given to the race of mortals—truly a benefit of infinite price (cf. Ps. 19:8–11; 2 Tim. 3:16).

All those gifted with healthy judgment and persuaded of the divine origin and authority of the Word have recognized it to be a treasure whose value is impossible to conceive. Though God had instructed the human race about the way to live through reason, man willingly plunged himself into the most profound darkness from which no one could ever expect escape. How good of God to make the light of His Word shine into the world and under the new economy to disseminate it to all nations, so that now no mortal should lack a guiding light as he makes his way through the gloomy darkness of this life. Assuredly the Word of God is the light of God (Ps. 119:105). He who reads it hears God speaking to him: he converses with God and with Christ Jesus Himself. He recognizes in the voice and writings of the prophets and apostles the very voice of the Holy Spirit. This Word is the fountain

of life for him. It is medicine for his mind. It is food for his spirit. He finds here the delights of the celestial paradise.

In Scripture there is nothing inferior or cheap, nothing fictitious or far-fetched, nothing false or mistaken, nothing dry or sterile. Everything is valuable, pure, solid, and nourishing. If the meaning of certain texts is profound and difficult, this only serves to stimulate our curiosity, deepen our meditations, and sharpen our reflections on Scripture. In short, the Bible expresses divine wisdom in every part and is worthy of its author, the most exalted and most rational God. “The sayings of the LORD are pure, silver refined in a tile oven, purified sevenfold” (Ps. 12:6).

Reading the Word of God is a means for advancing in sanctification and holiness and is a practice established by God Himself. It affects one’s entire spiritual life. Experience itself teaches that everyone who gives himself to meditating on the Word of God comes away from the exercise a better person—more knowledgeable, humbler, more holy, better prepared for the conduct of life. For the presence of God, which he hears speaking in the Word, affects him and inspires him with reverence for God. The glory of God shines out to him. As a person reads and meditates on Scripture, the Spirit of God who inspired it influences him. Through the Word, the Spirit sanctifies such a person, strengthens him, comforts him, confirms his faith and hope, represses his vain lusts, and quiets his turbulent and wandering feelings. The Spirit stirs up every good affection in that person and furnishes him with the prudence and self-control necessary to face the attacks of Satan and the temptations of the world. The excellent Psalm 119 celebrates this universal experience of the saints.

But these fruits should not be expected from merely opening up and perusing the Bible. The divine Word must be approached conscientiously in keeping with its distinctive qualities. The spiritual discipline of reading Scripture must be approached according to the “rule of the sanctuary,” as God Himself requires, just like the exercise of prayer. The reader should apply himself to this exercise carefully and with reverence for God: approaching the Scriptures with a pure mind free from prejudices and preconceptions; ardently desiring a true understanding; having his mind composed, calm, and humble; and submitting himself

to God in faith and love. He must take up the reading not unwillingly but gladly, with pleasure and delight. Reading Scripture is not just pronouncing words aloud but carefully considering and reflecting on what is said. Many passages of Scripture will arrest us, and we should suck the sweetness from the flowers as the bees do.

What we read from Scripture should be ruminated, carefully recalled, and compared with other parts of the divine Word so that we may grow solidly and securely. We must meditate on the text, inwardly digesting it and turning it into part of our own substance. To read in this way is to eat the word of the Lord (Jer. 15:16; Ezek. 3:1; Rev. 10:9). It is to “drink from the fountains of salvation” (Isa. 12:3), to “feed in luxuriant and green pastures” (Ps. 23:2), and to “eat pure food” (Isa. 30:24). Text after text affirms that those who chew on Scripture will never come away empty, because the Word of God truly satisfies and fills its readers.