

The Discipline Of Prayer

Frederick J. Tritton



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email: publications@pendlehill.org

Foreword

This pamphlet owes its existence to the suggestion of Howard Brinton that the addresses I gave at a Pendle Hill Retreat in September 1947 should be revised for publication. I have done this, but have thought it best to preserve the form in which they were delivered. A chapter is added on prayer in daily life, a subject only briefly touched upon in the talks.

I wish it were possible to reproduce the substance of our discussions. Together we discovered a number of truths that alone we might have missed. These insights and the powerful silence which accompanied them have entered into the inner experience of those who participated in the Retreat. Although we could not, perhaps, express them in a form suitable for publication, they have become a part of what each of us as an individual has to give.

I would gladly have dealt with this important subject more thoroughly, but the claims of a busy life do not allow sufficient leisure. I hope, however, that this pamphlet, imperfect as I know it to be, may be of some service to the many who are looking for practical guidance along the path of prayer because they wish to make the most of their lives, not for the sake of self, but for God and for the service of his family here on earth.

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I. The Preliminary Discipline

A Retreat has been compared to a prolonged Meeting for Worship, in the spirit of which all our actions, social or solitary, are carried on. There is much truth in this, for an ordinary meeting for worship is a time set apart for a more intensive and deliberate cultivation of our communion with God, in the hope that when we get back to our normal life in the world, the influence of the quiet time may continue. Just bear that in mind throughout these days together, and you will find much spiritual blessing coming to you.

In worship you hold an attitude of expectancy. You put aside as far as may be all criticism and become open and receptive. So in Retreat you will find it well to suspend for the time being the exercise of the critical faculties. The human intellect is an exceedingly valuable instrument. To it we owe much of the development of our economic and political system, as well as the marvelous scientific and technical achievements of modern civilization. But it is a power that has been over-exercised, and although perhaps none of us here would venture to call himself an intellectual, we are all suffering more or less, in one way or another, from over-intellectualization. We are critical and analytical, rather than appreciative and creative, and this tendency at its worst leads to a habit of pulling things to pieces, including other people's reputations. Some persons simply cannot resist it, and we are all to some extent infected by the complaint. In another direction, also, the intellect appears to have got out of hand. Our scientists

and technicians have become so fascinated by the works of their minds that one achievement follows another without being coordinated into a general human pattern, and all sense of direction appears to have been lost. Indeed the scientists themselves are now becoming alarmed, and with the opening up of the atomic era are asking for world control of a power that may destroy man instead of serving him. This is another aspect of that loss of the vision of God and of superhuman values that is a feature of our age.

Here we shall, as far as possible, put this restless intellect of ours aside. We shall refuse to analyze and dissect. We shall seek to uncover a deeper layer of ourselves which we know is there but which does not ordinarily get satisfactory expression. Consciously or unconsciously, we are all suffering from the repression of this deeper layer, and we shall now give it a chance to reveal itself. Goethe speaks of that something which we do not bring with us into the world, but on which everything depends and without which we are not men, viz. reverence. Set about deliberately to cultivate reverence in all your relationships with people and things during these days. You won't find it easy, as that critical part of you will continually be asserting itself. Don't attempt to suppress it; treat it reverently, too, but invite it to retire for the time being. The plants and trees, the birds and animals, even inanimate things like tools and houses, consider them in an attitude of loving acceptance, as beings existing in their own right, manifestations of the wisdom and power and love of God. When Jesus told his disciples to consider the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, he must have meant something like this. You are to regard them not with the eye of the botanist who dissects in order to classify, or of the gardener who values them for their utility, or of the merchant who deals in them: five sparrows for two farthings. Contemplate them rather as does the poet, or the artist, for their own

sakes and for sheer joy in them, not for any profit you may get out of them scientifically or commercially. "To see a thing in its beauty," said Keats, "is to see it in its truth; and to see it in its reality is to see it in God, as a theophany, a revelation of him under one of his many aspects." To the lover of God all the works of the Lord praise Him and magnify Him for ever, and thus he sees in them more than beauty, divine as that is. To him they are manifestations not of some vague pantheistic life-force, but of the life and love of the Father who knows when the sparrow falls to the ground and who cares for all his creation. They are living sacraments, channels of grace. Pray to God to "cleanse the doors of perception," so that you may see the world in its infinite perfection, not divided up into a multitude of parts as the intellect sees it, but as an integrated and living whole, as God sees it.

Practice a similar attitude, with your fellows. Refuse to be critical or censorious, or if you cannot help it, pray for God's help to lift you out of such a negative state. Remind yourself continually that they are not mere objects, but that each is a living existential center, a person; each is unique and of infinite value; each exists in his own right, is an end in himself, and never to be treated as a means. In a world which is increasingly becoming mechanized and in which human beings have to fit themselves to the machine, this attitude of deep respect is all the more important.

Seek more consciously to "know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was," as George Fox urged upon Friends. "Feel the power of God in one another, that all may be one family, building up one another and helping one another," as the Advices on Ministry of London Yearly Meeting say. Absolutely refuse to attempt in any way to use other people for your own ends or to force your will upon them. Try to look at them always in the uncreated light of God.

If you profit by the opportunities afforded by this Retreat, you will take a good step forward along the path of discipleship. You will initiate or maybe accelerate a process which will enable you to keep your mind always alert and supple and disencumbered, so that you will gain a new zest in living and find an increasing delight in people, however ordinary, and in things, however commonplace. You may slip back over and over again, but you will have your face set in the right direction, and will never again be content with second best. You will be on the way to being remade "according to the divine pattern," and if you continue faithfully to use every available opportunity of spiritual discipline, your life in the world will change. You will not drift with the current; you will become one of those who by their presence in a situation are able to influence it for good. You will become a channel for the divine life, and God's power in you will redeem you from futility and enable you to act redemptively and creatively as a friend of God and a coworker with him.

II. Some Aspects Of Prayer

The spiritual discipline outlined in the foregoing can be practiced all the while; indeed it must become a habit if it is to be effective. I want now to speak about some forms of prayer that belong primarily to particular times, and which you may find it helpful to practice whenever you get a chance during this Retreat.

Catholic writers have made a great study of prayer, and seem generally agreed on the following classification: (1) Vocal prayer, mainly petition and intercession, (2) Mental prayer or meditation, (3) Affective prayer, (4) The prayer of simplicity or applied contemplation, (5) The prayer of quiet or infused contemplation. These divisions help some people and worry others. It is a useful exercise to try to understand them. But it is a mistake, I think, to look upon them as

representing elementary and advanced stages in the sense that once you have qualified in the first ones you have done with them. Treat them as useful classifications, but don't imagine that you will ever, so long as you are on earth, get beyond any of them. Petitionary prayer, for instance, which all of us may at some time have tended to think of as unworthy or unnecessary, we are never likely to be able to do without, especially in the form of intercession. The great saints and mystics — even Christ himself — practiced and advocated it. “Ask. Seek. Knock.”, said Jesus. Be as insistent in prayer as the importunate widow who worried the judge until he did her justice. Be in earnest and you will obtain your requests.

Let us look a little more closely at this matter of petition. It is of course important that we learn to ask aright. We generally begin simply by asking for material goods, and then we come to realize that the good things often stand in the way of better and need to be sacrificed for the sake of these. And so in time we learn to ask for spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit. God cannot give us this supreme gift without our asking, because until we want it more than anything else in the world we are not fit to receive it. When we can say out of the depth of experience, “My soul thirsteth for thee in a dry and thirsty land where no water is,” we are then ready for the living water.

And it is not what we ask for vocally that is of first importance. With or without the use of words we are all the while practicing the prayer of petition. I'm not sure that I know exactly what the economist has in mind when he speaks of the “effective demand” for a commodity, but I imagine it means the pursuit of the article until satisfaction is obtained. What is your effective demand? What are you seeking to get out of life? What is the thing you most want and will keep on pursuing until satisfaction is obtained? Business success? Social power? A home of your own with

the telephone and an automobile? Personal happiness? Or the kingdom of God and his righteousness? Search your hearts during this Retreat, and test yourself by the life of Christ and his cross, before which all earthly gain is loss.

There is a terrifying force in prayer of this kind. In recent years numerous books have been published which teach you how to concentrate your mind and obtain your heart's desire. It is summed up in a little rhyme, "Think, wish, and believe. That's the way to receive." But such prayer is dangerous unless it has been purified by Christ; otherwise the saying of the Psalmist may be fulfilled in you "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul."

It is here that Mental Prayer comes in. Through it the desires of our hearts may be tested and purified. Mental Prayer is true meditation. In order to practice it satisfactorily it is desirable to set aside a portion of each day in which to ponder over and saturate our minds with spiritual truths. The beginning is not easy, because all day long we are occupied with quite other things, often important and necessary, but quite often very trivial. To beginners the effort to steady the outgoing activity of the mind sufficiently to enable it to vibrate in tune with deeper realities, is a task that often disheartens. With patient persistence, however, it becomes less formidable, and the regular exposure of our minds to great spiritual truths will in time bring about a change in character. Our desires and petitions become less self-centered, and the thoughts of our hearts are cleansed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as the opening prayer of the Anglican Communion Service puts it.

Almost anything will do to start with, for everything is full of significance once we take time to look at it — a flower, a view from the window, a rug, or a stone from the garden; an incident of any kind, a personal problem (but it's better to avoid problems until one has gained some skill in mind

control). Best of all is some saying or teaching of Jesus. Take the Beatitudes, for example, one by one. Consider each in turn each day of the week and then begin again. Think of them as the qualities that Jesus expected to find developed in the characters of his disciples. See what wealth of meaning they reveal when quietly pondered over as indications of the way to true happiness. Or take in the same way the seven great affirmations of Jesus beginning with the words, "I am" — "I am the light of the world, the bread of life, the true vine, etc." Or consider the Fruits of the Spirit as described by Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians.

Poets such as Wordsworth, Whittier, Whitman, Browning, Shelley, and T. S. Eliot in his later works, contain much material that is valuable. Make a note of any passage that strikes you during your reading and use it as material for meditation.

A word of warning. As petitionary prayer can degenerate into self-seeking unless purified by meditation, so mental prayer may slip into an interesting, nay fascinating, exercise unless we constantly seek to relate our thoughts to our conduct. We must remind ourselves continually that this is prayer and not merely a delightful intellectual occupation. We must be continually challenging ourselves, testing our lives by the Life that we have been thinking about. And if in such self-examination we may tend to become discouraged, we must at once direct our thoughts away from ourselves to God and his redeeming power. Indeed, no devotional period should be considered complete unless at some time during it we leave our reflections and open ourselves fully to God, present with us, within yet beyond us, in whom we live and move and have our being, and pray that he will fill us with himself and transform us according to his own divine pattern, Christ. We thus pass from thinking about spiritual things to offering ourselves to the divine Person himself. We move from the third

person, past tense, to the second person, present tense; from the experience of I—He to the relationship I—Thou

In Affective Prayer we do not so much exercise our intelligence in thinking about divine things, as our feelings in love towards the author of all things lovely. When one is not in a good condition for mental exertion one can still offer one's affection to God. Sometimes our whole time of prayer may be spent in these gentle breathings of love. The risk in this form of prayer is emotionalism, which may be avoided by a stern denial of anything that seems like sentimental or emotional indulgence. This prayer is most wholesome and effective in deepening our experience when it is most free from fervor, and is just a simple, sincere expression of our wholehearted love to God, the Father, or Christ, the Savior.

III. Contemplation Of The Prayer Of The Presence

Now there will almost certainly come a time, after maybe years of practice, when we might have expected to have developed some expertness, that meditation and indeed all formal prayer, becomes difficult and even distasteful. This is not so likely to happen if we have regularly followed the practice of never closing our time of quiet without an offering of ourselves directly to God. We may then keep some skill in meditation whilst gradually passing into a form of prayer which is practically without form. It corresponds more or less to the prayer of simplicity or applied contemplation, which may in turn, by God's grace, yield to the prayer of quiet or infused contemplation. But the terms are unimportant; what matters is the experience, though many may never reach any sustained experience of infused contemplation in this life. Some writers make much of the fact that contemplation is very different from meditation, and assert that there is no transition but an abrupt break.

I believe that we can be saved much worry and even agony of mind if from the first days of taking prayer seriously we practice simple contemplation such as I have spoken of — not vocal petition in the usual sense, not affective prayer, but the simple, formless, imageless, unemotional offering of ourselves to God in pure surrender.

But if it should happen notwithstanding that we come to a point where we simply cannot meditate however much we try, and that our times of devotion cease to be profitable, we should take it as a leading that our prayer should consist less in words and forms — mental images and intellectual reasonings — and that most of the time should be spent in simple contemplation. It is here that the great mystics — especially John of the Cross, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, John Chapman in his *Spiritual Letters*, and above all, for the Quakers, George Fox and Robert Barclay — come to our aid, and where Catholic and Quaker meet on common ground.

Some of the best advice in the practice of contemplative prayer is given in George Fox's letter to Lady Claypole, Oliver Cromwell's favorite daughter. She had been going through a period of spiritual distress, and Fox writes to her as a spiritual director. The whole letter, though rather diffuse, is worthy of careful study. I have only space for a few extracts. You will note that he says nothing about meditation, or petition, or affective prayer. He is advocating the Quaker version of the prayer of contemplation, in which all personal desires, imaginations, and thoughts are to be put aside, and without any ardor or emotion one is to turn simply to God and stay the mind on him.

"Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord, from whom life comes; whereby thou mayest receive his strength and power to allay all blusterings, storms, and tempests. That it is which works

up into patience, into innocency, into soberness, into staidness, into quietness, up to God, with his power.... Therefore be still a while from thy own thoughts, searchings, seekings, desires, and imaginations, and be staid in the principle of God in thee, that it may raise thy mind up to God and stay it upon God.... This then is the word of the Lord unto you all; whatever temptations, distractions, confusions, the light doth manifest and discover, do not look at these temptations; but look at the light which discovers them, and makes them manifest; and with the same light you may feel over them to receive power to stand against them.... That ye may feel the power of an endless life, the power of God, which is immortal; which brings the immortal soul up to the immortal God, in whom it doth rejoice.”

This practice of loving contemplation brings freedom: freedom from our own restless minds, our own personal cravings, from our own concepts and fantasies. It brings such liberation and joy that it seems incredible to the normal consciousness. It is no tense, strained concentration, seeking as it were by force of will to attain one's end. The will comes in, but only to sustain the attention. The attitude is rather that of wooing than of compelling. It implies, in the act of self-giving, an opening of oneself inwardly to receive, because one is entering into a relationship in which one's old self is set aside but in which there is a mingling of essences, a merging of being in a mutual flow of life. No distractions are to turn us aside, no thoughts, however good, are to draw us away from this supreme occupation; we are to persevere steadily until our minds are raised up to God and stayed upon him.

Let us now consider Robert Barclay's approach to this subject. In the chapter "Of Worship" in his "Apology for the True Christian Divinity" he points out that the Quaker form of worship, although it might seem strange to many, has been practiced in all ages. He affirms that it is identical

with the prayer practiced by certain mystics and set forth in a book called "Sancta Sophia" put out by the English Benedictines in 1657. It is apparently an English translation of this book, under the title "Holy Wisdom," by Augustine Baker, which is still in use, containing a considerable amount of very valuable material. The Quakers, however, says Barclay, did not "make of it a mystery, only to be attained by a few men or women in a cloister." God was "revealing and establishing this worship, and making many poor tradesmen, yea young boys and girls, witnesses of it." The essence of such prayer consisted in the "abstraction of the mind from all images and thoughts and the prayer of the will." We are to "wait upon God," or watch before him, not only in an outward silence of the body but an inward silence of the mind from all its own imaginations and self-willing. This watchfulness is of the kind so often commended in the scriptures, for instance, "As the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their master, so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that he have mercy upon us." Here we have the picture of those "who only stand and wait," but who none the less serve. With all personal thoughts and desires, even the desire for their own good, set aside, their whole attention is focused on their lord until with a sign of the hand he gives his orders. Such watchfulness and concentration would be ours in prayer, until we know beyond a peradventure that the Master is addressing us. When this awareness does come, there is a satisfaction and a certainty about it that is utterly convincing. You cannot be deluded by the projection of your own imaginations and desires when you have deliberately laid them aside. The method is not entirely foolproof, especially in the early stages, but steady practice and constant watchfulness against self-deceit bring the assurance that one is not alone but communing with the Lord of life.

It was, I believe, very largely the practice of this prayer that gave the early Quakers their assurance that God had

spoken to them and was supporting them. Some were deluded and led astray, but on the whole the movement was sound, and its fruits were proof of its being on right lines. In this the practice of group worship, with its natural check upon extravagances and its encouragement of what was pure and healthy, played a very important part. The assurance which came to them gave them the ability to speak with convincing power and to bring many others to the same experience. It might be good if Friends today, instead of concerning themselves so much with the vocal ministry and the use of the Bible in the Meeting for Worship — both of which are important, but secondary — paid more attention to this form of prayer and encouraged its more diligent practice both alone and in the group. For it is essentially the Quaker form of prayer par excellence and the one in which Quakers should become more proficient. Other forms have their place, mainly as a preparation for this, which we neglect at the peril of our spiritual growth. Some believe that only specially endowed persons can practice it, but, the essentially Quaker form of prayer as Barclay showed, is available to all, often most fully to the humblest. If we could but unlearn our clever intellectual ways, we too should be able to pray this prayer of simple regard and enter upon a whole new range of experience. The secret of proficiency lies in the ability to see that the greatest things in the Kingdom of God are the simplest, and in the willingness to put away all pride and self-assertion and become as humble and teachable as little children. In emptying ourselves of all conceit in our own abilities we become capable of entering into the supreme relationship and so of knowing the fullness of the life of God flowing into ours.

This aspect of prayer is so important that it is worth a little further consideration. Possibly some hints from my own experience may be helpful. I have by no means got

beyond meditation and petition, and generally use them as a preparation. Then I turn to contemplation with some such words as these: "O God, thou art here, nearer to me than I am to myself. I want during the rest of this time to give myself entirely to thee. Do with me as thou wilt." Or a few minutes devoted to making my own the opening clauses of the Lord's Prayer will put me into the right frame of mind. Then I simply offer myself to God — not conceived of in any form or picture, not in my mind, nor outside as though he were an object occupying space, I turn away from the outer world, away from my own reasonings, and direct my attention to the Beyond that is Within — or, as I prefer to say, to the Beyond that is approached through the Within. I endeavor to refrain from words or thoughts, but if as is inevitable at first I find my attention wavering, I repeat the formula recommended by John Chapman in his *Spiritual Letters*: "O God, I want thee, and I do not want anything else," without reflecting upon it. Or just the little word, "God," may be sufficient, as suggested in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. I do not let myself get worried or anxious if my mind wanders. I ignore distractions as far as possible, and just hold that thin thread of attentiveness fixed not upon the idea or feeling of God, but upon God himself. Feeling, in the usual sense of the word, enters very little into this experience, because feeling here may be as deceptive as imagination. The will comes into operation, but not a straining intensity of effort which might defeat its own end; rather a quiet watchfulness — perhaps the alert passivity which Roger Fry described as his attitude to the pictures he was studying.

But nothing happens! That may be so. I have no exalted states of mind, no ecstatic feelings, no sense of being overwhelmed by the love of God. These have their place, but it does not seem to be here. But if nothing is happening in the phenomenal world, I have no doubt that God is at work. I seem to have come close to my spiritual center, the

core of my being, beyond the surface ego to a deeper self through which something “opens inwardly upon God”, as Rufus Jones says. One becomes rooted and grounded, established; one’s knowledge about God does not increase as in meditation, but one’s direct knowledge of him as an inescapable and ineffaceable reality grows steadily and surely.

You know you are not deceived, because imagination is still, and emotion is like a sea at rest; these can delude you no more. You know neither that aridity nor desolation, nor any deprivation of comfort, even in worship; neither conflict nor misunderstanding; nor, as Paul said, things present overwhelming you, nor things to come threatening, nor height nor depth (that is, exaltation of spirit tending to pride, nor depression taking the heart out of one); not anything at all in all creation can finally separate you from God and his love as revealed in Christ.

That is something immensely worthwhile, and should encourage all to attempt this form of prayer, which I believe will in due course bring about that transformation of character which makes us as little children in the Kingdom of God.

Finally, the remarkable and significant thing about Quakerism is the association of the most deeply mystical prayer with the most active preaching of the gospel and concern for its practical application. We have of late tended to concentrate on the last of these. Our worship has been meditation rather than contemplation, and so we have not been ardent publishers of truth. The last generation of Friends was inspired by the recently published Quaker histories which revealed primitive Quakerism in its dynamic form. This generation will find its inspiration, not in the records of the past but in a fresh discovery of God through the practice of the Prayer of the Presence.

IV. Intercessory Prayer

This is a subject on which much has been written and on which much might be said. I will confine myself largely to the practical side.

In the first place, the word itself is a stumbling-block for many. It seems to suggest something out of harmony with their best thought of God, as though he needed to be urged to do good to his children. One thinks of the importunate widow pleading with the unjust judge, who eventually fulfilled her request lest by her continual coming she might weary him. We cannot believe this gives a true picture of God. Surely he is not like that. Of course he is not like that, and in telling the parable Jesus did not suggest that he was; he was urging persistence in prayer: "Men ought always to pray and not to faint."

The word used in the New Testament for intercession does not contain the idea of imploring or pleading with one who is obdurate; it simply denotes approaching somebody on behalf of another. In this sense Paul in Romans 8:26, speaks of the Spirit helping our infirmities by interceding for us because we do not know how to pray aright. And in Hebrews 7:25, it is said of Jesus that he "ever liveth to make intercession" for those who come to God through him. We are poor things, and our prayers are very feeble, but God himself through Christ and his Spirit helps to make them effective.

So, too, we are called upon to help one another. Bound up as we are in the bundle of life with the Lord our God and with our brothers and sisters, to us it is given to act on their behalf when they are unable to act effectively themselves or when they are in special need. There is indeed a spontaneous impulse that makes us want to call in a higher power than our own when special need arises, but the impulse, like all others, needs disciplining so that

the intercession shall be made according to the will of God (Romans 8:27). Let us bear this firmly in mind, otherwise our prayers will be fruitless and possibly harmful.

Intercession, then, is no easy thing to be undertaken lightly. It does not consist in just having pleasant thoughts about people. Although this is better than having unpleasant thoughts and may be helpful, it is not intercession, which requires a sustained effort of the will. Such effort, however, is not to coerce God or to force things to happen, but to see the situation as clearly as possible in all its bearings and to bring our own will into line with God's.

Here is someone sick or tempted or going through a spiritual conflict, or taking on a tremendous task. The situation is almost overwhelming, and sometimes apparently hopeless. I must seek to understand the circumstances, and from such understanding give my help. If I can see at all clearly what is the ultimate will of God — and that should not be difficult in the instances given — I offer myself and all that I have — spiritual and material — to God for that person. Nothing less will suffice. It is all I am entitled to do; I cannot offer anything or anyone else. It may be that the answer to my prayer will come in showing me something I can do, and it is important that I should be ready to do it. Or I may be able to suggest something to some one else, which I am at liberty to do if I am sure there is nothing further for me to do. Or no practical direction may come, in which case I may be none the less sure that God is at work, and that maybe my offering has provided just the linking up or the channel that was needed to enable the spiritual forces to flow more freely for the one in need.

I can pray for causes in the same way, or for spiritual movements, bearing in mind, however, that movements and causes are sustained by persons. I may pray for peace, or for statesmen and rulers, for prisoners and captives, sick persons and young children, and all the other categories

mentioned in the beautiful Church of England litany. I cannot know all the circumstances of these cases in detail, and that is one of the difficulties of such intercessions, but when one or the other has been brought to my attention I must regard it as a call and do the best I can. In all this I must continually remind myself that it is not the words that matter but the offering of myself.

It may seem that this is an exhausting business. But it is not; it is rather a process that brings our scattered forces into a focus and links us up with the powers of the spiritual world. That is why people come away from meetings where intercession of this kind has taken place with a sense of quiet strength and renewed vitality, as if they had experienced the inflow of power into themselves. And this is the case, but it has not stopped there. In giving they have received, and their reception has been in proportion to their giving. If they have really succeeded, as some do, in making a total offering of themselves, then they may become “filled with all the fullness of God.”

There are two further points I would like to mention. One is “lists.” If this responsibility is so serious, then how am I to fulfill it? Endless are the numbers of those needing help; must I therefore go through a long list daily? Not necessarily. Make your list if you will; it is a salutary reminder, and so easily we forget; but don’t let your intercession become mechanical. Have a time each day for this service, and perhaps once a week a longer time, and bring to God those persons and things that are uppermost. Then quietly go over any others that occur to you, and if any are lighted up, take it as an indication that you should pause longer over them. It is a good practice when praying for, say, an aged mother or one’s child, to draw in all the other old mothers and children in the world. This will save you from self-centeredness, which is a danger even in the prayer of intercession.

The other point is this. Some of us, in spite of our efforts in practicing the Prayer of the Presence, have periods of dryness when we are so greatly in need of the “streams of refreshing” ourselves that we feel utterly useless. Can we practice intercession at such a time? Yes, we can, and I will quote from one of Evelyn Underhill’s letters which I have found helpful. Writing to one who is in the trough, she urges him (or her) to keep on with his prayers whether or not he *feels* them, and adds, “You can also offer your prayers, obedience, and endurance of dryness to our Lord, for the good of other souls — and then you have practiced intercession. Never mind if it all seems for the time very second-hand. The less you get out of it, the nearer it approaches to something worth offering — and the humiliation of not being able to feel as devout as we want to be, is excellent for most of us.” There is great truth in this statement, as I can affirm from my own experience. It seems strange to offer our weakness and incapacity on behalf of another person. But it is a fact that the power of God is quite as often demonstrated in this way as when our prayers come easily and confidently.

V. Prayer In Daily Life

Prayer may be defined as the expression of a basic and persistent impulse of man’s nature to reach out towards that which is greater than itself; the effort to enter into relation with a Reality of which it is only vaguely aware and which it longs to know more fully, and which later it recognizes as the cause of its outreaching. The process may be likened to the influence of the sun on a plant. The plant is impelled by a law of its own nature to seek the light, and as it does so the creative forces are set in motion and it grows and increases its area of receptivity. The

impulse which leads to growth is in the plant, but the real cause is in the sun. The plant's action is a response to the action of the sun's rays and the result is growth. The plant may be quite unaware of the sun itself, the source of those rays to which it reaches out.

In man this reaching out to that which is beyond, results in growth of various kinds: physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual. He may not be aware of the cause, and even when it is pointed out may not believe it, but his reaching out is response rather than initiative, and the increase in growth is not the end, wonderful as are its expressions in cultural and scientific attainments. The end is the kind and quality of relationship that man achieves with that which stimulated his response.

His incidental acquisitions are organic growths that minister to that end; they increase the area of his receptivity. Here is the reason for the cultivation of the regular practice of prayer. The true end of man, says the Westminster Confession, is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. St. Ignatius said it was to praise, reverence, and serve the Lord our God. When man keeps this in mind, the result is an ever deepening relation with Reality, communion with That which gave him being, fellowship with the Father. It is an end which has no end, for this relationship which appears to begin in time belongs not to time but to eternity.

If, through prayer, he fixes his attention on God, all his achievements, regardless of the field of his secular activity, will tend towards that end. If, however, he is fascinated with things, glories in them, and looks upon them and their acquisition as the main end of his existence, they do truly become an end, the end of his better striving. Militarism and secularism and the lust for power dominate and lead to war and conflict in which men destroy one another. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus warned men of

this, and Paul described its dire results in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans.

Today we have reached a worldwide crisis caused by the fact that man in general has lost all sense of his true end. "Things are in the saddle," as Emerson said years ago, "and ride mankind;" and the Christian Church has become infected by the general tendency of the time to a degree unparalleled since many years. In a *Pendle Hill Bulletin*, Howard Brinton asked: "Can a religious society which is being transformed by the world according to a worldly pattern, effectively engage in the spiritual reconstruction of that world?" The answer is obviously, "No." But it need be no defeatist answer; it is a recognition of fact. It is a confession of failure, and if it is a true confession it is wrung out of an encounter with the Supreme Reality, which in turn releases fresh forces for action. Such action operates first in individual lives, bringing them into unity with God and with themselves. But because mankind is one, these forces of the Spirit spread by a holy contagion until large communities are regenerated and the will of God once more is being done on earth by man. The leaven may work very quickly (as leaven usually does), or it may work slowly, but there is no earthly reason why such a new outpouring (or uprushing) of the Spirit of God should not take place in these latter days as will cause many to ask, as some early Quakers did in their wondering delight, "What, is the Kingdom of God come to be with men?"

But if we wish to see and take part in this new Pentecost we must become men and women of prayer. It was as they waited upon Him in the silence, their "minds out of all things," that the heavenly Presence appeared in the assemblies of early Friends. Sometimes that experience is ours today, but it is not common, and more often we hear the complaint of deadness that is only relieved by unprofitable ministry. Why is it that our meetings do not

more frequently throb with spiritual life? It is largely because we have not learnt as individuals to cultivate that deep impulse and direct it consciously and deliberately, and our hearts and minds are therefore unprepared for the group experience. That experience, while it differs from that of the individual praying alone to the Father in secret, is yet dependent upon the spiritual quality which the personal practice of prayer develops, and is indeed the crown and fulfillment in fellowship of the knowledge of God which is given to us in our private devotions, and which binds us together in preparation for that task of transforming the world of which Howard Brinton speaks.

“Lord, teach us to pray,” asked the disciples of Jesus, and in reply our Lord and theirs gave them that model prayer which is so familiar through frequent recital as to have almost become degraded to one of the “vain repetitions” that he warned against. Anyone setting out afresh to pray could not do better than take it for a period as a theme for daily meditation leading to contemplation. The object of this practice is to assimilate its meaning and implications, not only in order when using it to “pray with the understanding,” but also, as Jesus intended, so that its spirit may pervade all our prayers at all times.

It has been well said that “the heart of prayer is adoration,” for in adoration we are emptied of self in contemplating the wonder and glory of God. It is the kind of thing we have glimpses of when we lose ourselves in beholding natural beauty or in looking into the eyes of one we love. It seems as if it ought to be the culmination of a long process, the reward of patient plodding — “Enter into the joy of thy Lord.” But Jesus, in this prayer of his, puts it at the beginning. Adoration may be the goal, but it is also the starting point. It may be the end of our spiritual exercises, but it is also at the gateway.

We are to start, then, by looking right away from ourselves. It is in obedience to an inward impulse that we

pray; we wish to cultivate that impulse, but at first deliberate attention doesn't help. We are more than ever aware of our weaknesses, our distractions, our failings. As George Fox might have said, the Light has revealed evil. But once the evil is recognized, we are to turn away from it to God. We are to make a stupendous affirmation. We are to address Him as Father, and in doing so we affirm that our true nature and that of all men is of the same kind as His; we are by implication denying and renouncing the self which obeys the selfish and egocentric impulses. Then as we go on to say "hallowed be Thy name," we pray that all men may come to a knowledge of Him and may glorify Him by using all their powers as holy gifts entrusted to them. The whole earth is full of God's glory, and every act of man's life, every human institution, and every relationship, can show forth that glory by becoming a sacramental means of grace. Thus the whole world of men may become one holy family in God.

To pray for the coming of His kingdom is a natural sequence. From that attitude of selfless adoration, in which we want all our brothers to share, we turn to the warring kingdoms of this world and long that they may become the kingdom of God, that all may recognize his rule in social, political, and international relationships. He is the sole source of all authority, and all temporal powers owe allegiance to him, and only when that is recognized can there come harmony among them. But although he is Lord of all, his will is not yet being done upon earth. We men are never compelled by him, but he does seek our loving cooperation. Therefore when we say, "Thy will be done," it implies that we want to be "fellow-workers with God," and are, as a consequence of the vision that was ours in adoration, so deeply in love with him that we are ready at all times and at all costs to do the thing he wants. And that this is a costly matter the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane is convincing proof.

All this and a great deal more is implied in those opening clauses of the Lord's Prayer, and if we understand them aright, and make the effort required to identify ourselves with them, we shall be in the right spirit to utter the remaining petitions. In them we come back to ourselves and the things we and all men need for our daily life, and they, too, if deeply pondered will be found equally pregnant with meaning. Going through the whole prayer quietly and thoughtfully we shall find opportunities for healthy self-examination and sober reflection. We may find ourselves humbled and brought right down to bedrock. We shall learn to test our lives by that of the author of the prayer; the flaws in our conduct will gradually be made good, our spiritual base will be strengthened and confirmed, and our relationships with others more harmonious.

Suppose we take the complete prayer each day for a time, trying to see and realize it afresh as a whole and possibly using for this purpose a new translation, or reading it in another language. Compare the versions in Matthew and Luke with the better-known Prayer Book version. Study the context in which it appears, and note the illustrations Jesus uses in Luke to explain what he means by forgiveness. Refer to the discourse in John on the "Bread of Life" to throw light on the petition for our daily bread. Suppose we do this for a quarter of an hour, pausing on any of the clauses that specially appeal. Then recite the prayer slowly, uniting our whole being with it but without any tension or excitement, and remain quiet as long as we can in the mood created by the prayer. Cease as far as possible all discursive thought, cease meditation and thinking about God or about prayer, and wait, watchful and alert but without tension, in an attitude of loving attention to Him. We are to pass from subjective reflection upon God to personal intercourse and communion with Him. He is there, and all our prayer and meditation were but to help prepare for this

vital personal relation. To take an illustration from daily life — it is as if from thinking about my absent friend I am now to meet him face to face, with all the difference of attitude that implies.

We must not expect anything magical. It may be that nothing will happen, and we may have the feeling that the time has been wasted. But if we persevere steadily in this practice and cultivate this attitude of loving expectancy, quietly repeating the words “Our Father” or “Thy will be done” should the attention waver, in the course of time we shall come to realize that, whether or not we were directly conscious of it at the time, a sharing in a larger life is taking place. We become very sure of God, and with the Psalmist we can say: “Whom have I in heaven but thee, and who is there on earth beside thee? My heart and my flesh faileth, but God is the strength of my life and my portion forever.”

It is very salutary and helpful for non-ritualists to make use of the ancient prayers and hymns of the Church as a theme for meditation. They will not as a consequence have any more faith in forms, but they will understand better their appeal; they will perceive that these versicles and responses, these collects and litanies, in most cases had their origin in someone’s experience. They enshrine a vision, an insight, or they may be the fruit of deep meditation, or of an encounter with God. And when one’s body and brain are weary, and one’s mind and spirit unreclected, or wandering, the quiet reading of part of the communion service or of a collect will act as a detentioning agent and prepare one for the great act of contemplation.

For with all the rich variety we may bring into our prayer life we must never forget what has been emphasized earlier, namely that reading, reflection, meditation, valuable as they are, should only be regarded as a

preparation. Their purpose is to make the life of the Spirit at least as real as the life of the world. That world, with its insistent beating upon our attention all day long in our business and social life, in newspapers and cinema and through the wireless; with the terrifying demands it makes upon our minds and emotions, "is too much with us; getting and spending we lay waste our powers." The daily turning from it all to reflect upon the things that belong to our peace is a vital necessity. But when by meditation we have disciplined our vagrant senses and wandering minds and brought them to a state of recollection, we leave our thinking and meditating and turn ourselves to God in the loving attention already referred to. This is the central act of our devotions and may be said to correspond to the receiving of Christ in the Holy Communion. If we can pass straight into contemplation without the preparation, well and good, but most of us need the preparatory exercises.

It is of great help towards making the life of the Spirit more real to adopt a rule. Just as the body can be made to follow a routine which leaves the mind free, so too can the mind itself be disciplined until it becomes obedient. This need be no mechanical thing so long as it is self-imposed and reviewed (and modified deliberately) from time to time. A daily program is invaluable. "Let my waking thoughts be of thee," prayed the Psalmist, and if we can lift up our hearts to God immediately we awake, it will mean that we have started the day well. It is wise not to get out of bed until we have got the set of our mind right. If circumstances compel us to get up before that has happened, we should deliberately concentrate more than usual on dressing and preparing for the day, doing the jobs to God's glory. Otherwise, during these routine occupations one can mentally run over the coming day, trying to see it as an opportunity for real fellowship and loving service.

Then comes the period of deliberate prayer and communion with meditation on the lines already suggested. You may start with ten minutes, but soon you will become so keen that you will find that you cannot do with less than half an hour, even if it means getting up earlier. It has been said that the average civilized man is not really awake until ten o'clock in the morning. But if you follow this practice you will be fully awake and ready to meet your responsibilities in the power of God. If you travel by train or bus spend a few minutes trying to see your fellow travelers as spiritual beings, living and moving and having their being in God. Use any odd times that might otherwise be wasted for lifting up your heart, or thinking of the subject of your morning meditation. At lunch time get five or ten minutes alone if possible when you "shut the door" and commune with the Father. Going home in the evening is a good time to reflect quietly on the events of the day, but even if you do it then, do not omit to do so before retiring. Ask pardon for the things you have done amiss, and believe that God in his mercy may be able to turn your evil to good so long as the repentance is genuine. Thank Him for his goodness. Pray for those you love or dislike or fear. Commit them and all the events of the day to God, and then shut the door on the world. As you get into bed commit yourself to God, and the prayer of the Psalmist may be made yours: "I will lay me down in peace, and take my rest, for it is thou, O Lord, only, that makest me to dwell in safety."

Once a week, at least, try to join in worship with others. If you can't go to a Quaker meeting you will find it valuable to attend some other. In either case prepare yourself if possible with half an hour's special prayer and meditative reading on Saturday evening. If health prevents you from going out, try to be present in spirit whilst the meeting or service is going on. You may not be able to keep this up for the whole hour, but do so at least for part of the time.

Two or three times a year, try to make a Retreat with other like-minded people. Of recent years small groups of Friends have been following this practice, and in group meditation and worship have found that the longer time together makes them more sensitive to the things of the Spirit and a growth in individual and group experience results. There is likewise an increase in power for service. Those whose worship with others is limited to an hour or so a week may find it difficult to realize what a difference such a longer period makes.

This pamphlet deals only with the rudiments of a great and inexhaustible subject, and has left many aspects untouched. But it is hoped that enough has been said to give some indications of how a natural impulse may be cultivated and, by the grace of God, lead to a growth in the knowledge and love of the Father and his son, Jesus Christ, that will gradually transform one's whole outlook and indeed one's basic character, and bring a deep sense of power and peace and of joy everlasting.