

## When Prayers Go Missing by Pastor Marty

When I first became a Christian, I was taught that every believer needed to have a time devoted to reading and studying the Bible and conversing with God. Of the two, the former often seemed to receive a greater emphasis for personal growth although prayer was described as the answer to every need. Since that time, I have been a part of many different churches, but the importance of devotional time has never been lessened in any of them. I think this is a constant through just about all Protestant churches—or at least those that are authentically Christian and not some type of universalist or liberal forgery. One of the first things I remember hearing as a Christian was my sister telling someone in the church, “The first day you miss reading your Bible, God knows; the second time, you know; the third time, everybody else knows.” The importance of prayer was stressed as well, but there seemed to be an unspoken assumption that reading the Bible would almost certainly be followed by prayer. The time issue was also definitive: real Christians spend an hour with God—in the morning of course—while nominal Christians spend less time, and those who did not have a regular devotional time every day were categorized as backslidden; it was simple, undeniable fact. Neglecting a daily time of reading and prayer was, similar to not tithing, an obvious and undeniable sign that someone was not living for God.

***The absence of a daily substantive devotional time was a clear sign of being lukewarm.***

The way this policy was taught, it was easy to imagine it was written on a third stone tablet that Moses received with the original Ten Commandments. Of course, there were rare exceptions that were identified in the footnotes: if someone could not read, lived in a culture where Bibles were unavailable, or was imprisoned without a Bible—which usually was due to persecution—then they would memorize whatever Bible verses they could and simply recite them; this was a viable loophole for extreme cases. As would be expected, there were far fewer exemptions for not having a scheduled time of prayer: it was still necessary immediately after a person woke up unless outside forces prevented it—in which case it could be delayed a few hours. It was easy to check if someone was neglecting this requirement by having them say grace before a meal: the longer a person prayed before eating, the less they were spending time with God on their own. I never found the actual formula written out, but I believe it is something like “SP/M = HLRD” (Seconds in Prayer per Meal equals Hours since Last Regular Devotion). A few nominal Christians sometimes tried to fake it, but there were clear signs, such as saying the exact same memorized prayer every time, neglecting to tithe a full 10% just because there was not enough money left for food or rent, or listening to secular music; as Jesus said, we know them by their fruit.

***The reason Jesus referred to fruits and not vegetables is that fruits are always visible.***

After going to college, I began to meet Christians who, surprisingly, had never discovered these truths as they were clearly revealed in Scripture. Occasionally, I would meet some who described their practice of “talking to God all day” in lieu of a specific devotional time. I would quickly admonish them that such a practice absolutely could not replace an RSD—a Regularly Scheduled Devotion. Unless they were full-time intercessors or Monastics, spending most of their time in prayer as it was, having an RSD was non-negotiable. Failure to acknowledge this fact was so serious that it required the immediate addition of the person’s name to a daily prayer list along with soliciting other authentic believers to pray for the person’s vulnerable and tremulous salvation. There was a third category for those who had their RSD in the evening instead of the morning, similar to those who tithed on their net income instead of their gross. They were authentic brothers or sisters who were misguided and less effective.

***We occasionally meet those who break the simple categories we set for ourselves.***

The obviousness of these principles seemed extremely clear to me until I began to read works by certain faith leaders that revealed astonishing variations. As I delved into the works of C. S. Lewis, Leanne Payne, Agnes Sanford, and Brother Lawrence, I noticed lifestyles where these rules did not fit. They clearly still had their RSD time, but their communication with God outside those times seemed no different. In effect, they maintained the same level of communion throughout the day. This is regularly described as Practicing the Presence of God. Of course, this is not something that is easy to accomplish. It takes time and effort to develop this habit effectively. It is far easier to do opposite: take a superficial level of communication resulting from a life of distraction and business and make our devotional time no different; that makes them similar, but it does so by lowering the one instead of elevating the other. We often hear that we should live during the week the way we live on Sunday; if we are not careful, we will fulfill that goal by living the same superficial or hypocritical life in church, just with different masks. True communication with God is a two-way conversation that requires active listening and attention, which most modern Christians have never learned how to do. As I once heard a minister say, “pouring holy water on an R-rated movie does not make it okay to watch.” The easiest way is not always best.

***If we are not careful, we will nullify our new nature instead of replacing the old one.***

There was a time in college after I heard about Practicing the Presence of God that I decided I wanted to live that way. People often say that it takes anywhere from one to three months to develop a new habit. When it comes to this type of thing, it is often longer because this is a habit that involves keeping our attention on God even while doing other things. What is almost impossible to maintain for more than a few minutes at a time at first eventually becomes something that constantly takes place in the back of our mind—an awareness of His Presence with us. When we are living with that awareness, it affects everything we say and do as well as what we think and feel. It is undoubtedly what Paul had in mind when he said, “walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh” and “set your mind on the things of the Spirit instead of the things of the flesh.” There was a period of almost three days when I was so conscious of God’s Presence with me that I felt myself in constant communion with Him. I have heard people say that we never go more than an hour with sinning, but during this time, I was too focused on God to even consider doing or saying anything that might offend Him. I certainly experienced some temptations, but I did not willingly and knowingly sin during that time. This is what Wesley calls Christian Perfection—not being without flaw but living in such love and devotion to God that knowingly sinning is the exception instead of the rule. Communion with God is how we get there.

***The more we Practice the Presence of God, the less we yield to our old sinful nature.***

Regrettably, my personal experience lasted only a short time. I had not learned how to forgive myself when I did fall, and I stopped trying because I felt I disappointed God. Since then, I have learned that accepting failure and going forward is key for growing closer to God, but I learned that many years after I got out of the practice. I have tried to develop that habit again many times since then, and there have been both successes and failures; sadly, I only occasionally have experienced something similar to what I did during those few days. My tendency, like many of us probably do, is to take days to get over failure instead of simply receiving His forgiveness and getting back on track. However, there are times when I suddenly sense His Presence “out of the blue” even when I am doing other things, and He leads me without my even realizing it: slowing down for no reason and not getting in an accident, deciding at the last minute to not do something and discovering it was significantly for the better, or following a hunch and finding out it was the Holy Spirit. Even our failures can be improvements over not trying.

***As we try to Practice His Presence, even failing is more successful than not trying.***

One aspect of attempting to develop the habit of Practicing the Presence of God is that we may discover we are communicating with Him even when we are not aware of it. Recently, I was surprised by an instance of this. I had decided two weeks ago for health reasons to not eat sweets for rest of the month. When I made this decision, I immediately thought of a friend who runs a business making high-quality organic pastries. At various times in the past, she has sent me some as a surprise. I realized that I would not be able to eat them if she did so and thought about telling her about this “fast” ... but was averse to sharing such a thing. I then had the thought that I could pray that she would not send any or would say something first, but I never actually prayed. A week ago, we were speaking on the phone, and she shared a situation with a store, and it made me again think about saying something ... but I did not. After we finished talking, the thought again came to me that I could pray that she would not send me any without saying something first; however, I still did not actually pray. I am not sure why, but for some reason, I just did not do it. Two days ago, we again spoke on the phone, and she told me that she had 3 dozen pastries from a cancelled order that she was going to send to me, but “for some reason” decided to ask before putting them in the mail. It immediately occurred to me that this was the exact situation I had thought about earlier and the exact thing I twice thought I should pray—but never did. In this instance, God not only warned me about the situation but answered the prayer I never prayed.

***God not only tells us what to pray but also sometimes answers prayers we do not pray.***

After we hung up the phone, I thought about this situation and started remembering numerous times when the exact same thing happened: I thought of something to pray, knew I should pray it, did not actually pray it, and had the answer exactly the way I had felt I should pray. This sounds a lot like when Jesus says, “The Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” However, there have also been countless times when I have not listened to a leading from the Holy Spirit and seriously regretted it after things went awry. James tells us in no uncertain terms that “you have not because you ask not.” As I continued to meditate on it, I began to discern a difference between the times I had a thought, did not respond, and regretted it, and those times I had a thought, did not respond, and saw the answer: I was, without realizing it, actively aware of God’s Presence. I was in that background communication with Him that was Practicing His Presence. In my mind, everything I was thinking of saying, doing, or praying was playing out in the context of how it related to God. Without consciously realizing it, I was lifting those concerns to God and acknowledging Him as the answer. It seemed that where the attitude of prayer is present, the actual verbalizing of it is not always required. Again, we cannot make a rule of this, for there are many times when a lack of prayer resulted in a lack of answers, and there are also many times I had to pray without ceasing for things. It is more about communion than communication.

***When it comes to prayer, it is sometimes more about communion than communication.***

Our technological age and modern culture has instilled in many of us a tendency toward passive communication: we think we are listening when we are really just waiting to hear something, and we think we are talking when we are really just sharing our thoughts. When it comes to prayer, both our listening and our speaking need to be active. We should listen for God’s voice the way we would strain our ears to hear the faintest sound of loved ones lost in the woods as we search and call their names. We should speak to God the way we would share our deepest heart with those we would lose if they did not realize how much they mean to us. Our society has so trained us to wear masks that we often do not even realize it when we are three steps removed from our own hearts. God’s Presence is often much closer to us when we are going through the most traumatic times in our lives. Maybe it is not the nature of the situation that makes Him real to us as much as the fact that we are finally real ourselves.