

Good & Beautiful & Kind

Chapter 4 ~ The Problem of Prayer

Part One of this book (chapters 1-3) dealt with *The Forces Behind the Fractures* that we face and experience in life. Now we enter Part Two (chapters 4-6), *Walking a Better Way*, which will guide us through our response...which begins with prayer.

Regarding prayer, you have heard me say numerous times, “*The primary purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we think God ought to do, but to be properly formed.*” (I gleaned that from Brian Zahnd.) It turns out that Rich agrees with that, even if he says it slightly differently, “*Forming love is the ultimate goal of prayer.*” (page 73) In other words, prayer is meant to transform us, shape us, heal us, make us whole. We begin to deal with the fracturedness of the world by dealing with the part of the world we have the most control of, influence/impact on, and responsibility for...namely, ourselves.

Rich has these sobering words, “*The world is fractured in large part because of the quality of our prayers...As a culture, ‘prayer’ has become code for a sentimentalism that is mildly sympathetic to tragedy but is helpless or even apathetic to producing real transformation...In the face of tragedy, division, and hostility, not all prayers are equal....our prayers have not done in us what we want to see done in the world.*” (pages 73-74, emphasis added)

The solution that this chapter lays out is, “...*not to give up on prayer but to give ourselves to prayer. It is not to pray less; it is to pray differently.*” (page 74)

- *How would you describe your prayer life? Powerful and effective? Anemic? Some other description? How is your prayer life forming you?*

The type of prayer that Rich advocates for in this chapter is known as “contemplative prayer”. It has its roots back in the early church, especially with the Desert Mothers & Fathers. (It’s also what we introduce people to in Prayer School.) I appreciate Rich’s simple definition, “*Contemplative prayer is the unhurried opening of oneself to God through silence, Scripture, and self-examination.*” (page 76)

(Since I mentioned Prayer School, I might as well also mention Soul School, which has as its main goal helping people to slow down and pay attention...to God, themselves, and others. So it’s contemplative in nature. If it piques your interest, check out...

<https://castletonumc.org/soul-school/>)

- *As you consider Rich’s description of contemplative prayer, what do you think/feel? What do you think/feel about prayer as “mutual beholding” (page 77)?*
- *What are some types, styles, experiences of prayer that you have had...either personally or in a group setting?*

Three Biblical Concepts That Inform Contemplative Prayer.

1. **God Is Closer to Us Than We Are to Ourselves.** “[It begins with] a recognition that our prayers do not bring God to us but position us to grow in our awareness of God’s nearness. In contemplative prayer, we don’t summon God but fix our hearts on the truth that He is always summoning us to communion with Him.” (page 79)
 2. **Christ’s Work on the Cross Opens the Door to Accessing the Presence of God.** “...communion with God is not some kind of human achievement but is always a gift from Him—a gift most profoundly seen in Christ’s work on the cross.” (page 80)
 3. **We Are Invited to Dwell with and in God.** “Contemplative prayer is our yes to God’s yes to us...Over and over, the invitation from Jesus is to dwell, abide, remain, and stay with Him...In contemplative prayer, our aim is not to do something for God, or even gain something from Him; it’s simply to be with God.” (pages 81-82, emphasis added)
- *How do you commune with God? How do you acknowledge and enjoy God’s Presence with you? Or, what practices or rhythms help you to become aware of, alert and attentive to, and attuned with God’s Presence?*
 - *What intrigues you about contemplative prayer? What questions do you have about contemplative prayer?*

“What our world is desperately searching for are people who are living from a depth of life saturated with God’s presence of love.” (page 82) I would add that this is what we, the Church, can offer...not programs or events but people (us) who know God and can help them know God too. As Karl Rahner said, “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” (page 82), and Rich adds, “...a mystic is someone who has a genuine experience of God...Simply someone who takes the radically available presence of God seriously.” (pages 82-83)

- *Who is someone you know who knows God in a deep, personal, and intimate way? When people encounter the CUMC family (at gatherings or out and about) do they encounter people who know God, people who are marked by their experience with God? Elaborate.*
- *What comes to mind when you hear the word “mystic”? Would you consider yourself a “mystic”? Why or why not? (Or is that even something you desire to be?)*

When we experience God we also experience our true self. I think of Isaiah when he “...saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted...” (Isaiah 6:1) and his response, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...” (Isaiah 6:5) When Isaiah saw God, he also saw the truth about himself. Or take Peter when he experienced a miraculous catch of fish because he listened to Jesus, “he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’” (Luke 5:8) To experience God, in person or

in prayer, is humbling, sobering, and clarifying...we see ourselves as we really are. Perhaps that's the reason many people avoid prayer...they prefer, or are more comfortable with, their false self.

Rich explains, “...*our false self is a constructed identity that in some ways tries to play God.*” (page 83). As we experience God in contemplative prayer we see “...*the inconsistencies within...our personal contradictions...illusions of ourselves...our impure motives, repressed anger, unprocessed pain, stubbornness, and lusts...*” (pages 84-85) Or let me say it this way, we can't be transformed if we don't recognize our need to be transformed.

- *How has Jesus given you a clearer view/understanding of yourself? Describe a time when you felt His gentle correction.*

To say all this another way, what the world needs is Jesus. Yet, one of the main ways people come to know that is through Jesus' people, the Church. It's the transformed life of Jesus followers that alerts people to the possibility that they too can be transformed by the love of God. Sadly, Christians/the Church can get embroiled in petty and distracting issues rather than being focused on the receiving and sharing of God's transforming love. We can't give away what we haven't first experienced.

There has been much work done recently around spirituality and neuroscience. Rich touches upon that on pages 86-88 (section titled: Being an Unanxious Presence). To put it simply, contemplative prayer is good for our brains...and thus our lives and our relationships. To say it another way, prayer is more than a “spiritual” exercise; it has physical (specifically neurological) and emotional effects on us. This is because we are holistic/integrated creatures.

- *Think of someone you know who you consider to be an anxious presence (without naming them, of course.) What is it like to be around them? Flipping that around, how would you know if you were an anxious presence? Would you even want to know? What would you do about it?*
- *How have you experienced the peaceful, calming, anxiety-reducing effect of prayer?*

Rich makes the point that, because we are constantly bombarded with messages, information, and noise, “...*our speaking often comes from a place not rooted in God*” (page 89) unless we intentionally seek out silence. And since our primary way of engaging the world around us usually involves words, it is of utmost importance that those words come from our abiding in Christ...which the practice of contemplative prayer helps us do. Isn't it interesting that in order to be good, helpful, healing with our words, we need to learn silence? Perhaps it's helpful and motivating to be reminded that the goal is LOVE.

- *How do you seek out silence? What effect has silence had on you, your life, your relationships?*

I appreciate that Rich lays out HOW to pray contemplatively. He begins with a preface (referencing his earlier book *The Deeply Formed Life*) which states that it's important to...

- Befriend silence
- Reframe distractions
- Remember that God is always waiting for us with open arms

(see page 90)

I would personally recommend trying what Rich lays out on pages 91-92 as a good place to start. In fact, we'll make it the Soul Training Exercise for the week (see below). Rich concludes with a good reminder, *"...the point of this kind of prayer is not to measure the change we want to see but rather to meet with the God we do not see."* (page 92) The goal is to develop a comfortable, confident, enjoyable familiarity with God. Contemplative prayer is a time-tested way to do that.

Soul Training Exercise ~ Contemplative Prayer

This week we're simply going to practice what Rich describes in the final two pages of this chapter. I'll paraphrase the process...

- Let's start with positioning. Sit upright, comfortable but attentive, in a chair, with feet planted on the floor and hands open palms up on your lap. You'll probably want to close your eyes, as things that come into our field of vision can be distracting.
- Settle in by taking a few deep, cleansing breaths and allow your body to relax and your mind come to rest.
- We're not asking for anything...just acknowledging God's Presence, with more of a listening posture as opposed to a talking posture. It is very common to have varied and distracting thoughts...don't worry about them (it doesn't mean you're "doing it wrong"), just come back to center with a little breath prayer like Pastor Matt taught us recently, "I'm here; You're here; it's good." If necessary, write down any pesky thoughts that won't go away so you can release them and come back to them later.
- You may or may not want to set a timer...your call. You may want to incorporate some reading of Scripture beforehand in preparation or afterward in reflection...or not. You may want to incorporate journaling...or not. Don't seek or expect anything to "happen", rather, it's "happening" simply by sitting with Jesus. Don't judge it, just enjoy it.

As Rich points out, this is a form of prayer for seasoned experts and young beginners. Try to do it a few times this week.

P.S. We will be offering Prayer School one more time this year...November 13-14 (Friday evening from 7:00-8:30; Saturday morning from 9:00-12:30)