

Prayer – Overview

I'm certainly not going to cover all the aspects of prayer in this lesson. That's a good thing, since we don't want to talk *about* prayer. We want to *pray*. My focus is to demonstrate why prayer is derived from, motivated by, and directed toward the truth of Scripture.

There are loads of materials to tell us *how* to pray. Some use the Lord's Prayer as a 7-step model with worship as its beginning and its end:

1. Worship (Our father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name)
2. Submission (Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven)
3. Expectation/contentment (Give us this day our daily bread)
4. Confession (and forgive us our debts)
5. Forgiveness (as we forgive our debtors)
6. Asking (and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one)
7. Worship (For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever)

Others use the acronym "ACTS" – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

There are also loads of *motivational* materials which explore the wonder and benefits of prayer. E. M. Bounds wrote a classic collection. Some of his statements are disquieting: "Prayer moves men because it moves God to move men."¹ If God is Creator, and I am his creature, then I would think I cannot move God; he moves me. And yet there are times when God will not move until we ask him (as with Elijah and the rain – James 5:17). In other words, God has made prayer a necessary part of acting out his will in the world. That's a curious and sobering fact.

And so I'm more concerned in this lesson with the "*why*" of prayer. What compels us to pray? What is the purpose of prayer? What is the proper subject of prayer? I believe if we know the reason for doing something, then we're more likely to do it in a timely and proper manner.

The Nature of Prayer

In Lesson 8, I suggested that prayer is many things. At its simplest, prayer is talking to the Father through the Son by the Spirit.² Despite this apparently simple definition, prayer is the most profound privilege and obligation that any Christian can have. Indeed, prayer is our duty.

Prayer is one of God's ordained means to effect his will in the world. It is one way that we "participate in the divine nature" (2Pet. 1:1-8).³ How prayer enables us to participate is a little complicated, so bear with me. God tells us to pray, and he even tells us what to pray (1Kgs 17-18; Job 42:8). If we pray what he tells us to pray, then God will fulfill our prayer, in his time.

¹ Bounds, E.M., *Possibilities in Prayer*, IV "Prayer – It's Possibilities."

² Eph 2:18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

³ 2 Peter 1:1-8 Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. NIV

Prayer is conditional in nature. God tells us that when we pray, we must pray in the Spirit, and according to his will (Eph. 6:18; 1Jn. 5:14-15).⁴ Those are the conditions. They are not restrictive conditions, but prescriptive. That is, they are not designed to limit our prayer, or qualify our prayer, but rather to direct the content and focus of our prayer.

Attitudes of Prayer – from John Reisinger⁵

- *Prayer never makes God my servant to give me everything I think I must have in order to make me happy.* God is not a “heavenly bellhop” who carries my suitcase of selfish desires any place I command.
- *Prayer never allows me to either dictate my will to God nor to make God in any way change His mind.*
- *God has a fixed plan and His plan is the best plan.* God is determined to carry out His plan, and neither our sin nor our “believing” prayers are going to derail or in any way change God's ultimate decrees (Job 23:13).
- *True prayer is a frank admission that God is sovereign.* When we really pray, we admit that the thing is in God's hands alone. We are saying that tomorrow, and all it brings, is not under our control but under His control. It is in His hands and not ours.
- *Prayer is a joyful surrender to God's sovereign purposes.* We are acknowledging that God has the right and power to do whatever seems good to Him. We are saying that regardless of what God does tomorrow, we know it is part of the “all things” in Rom. 8:28.⁶
- *Prayer is earnestly pleading with God for grace to glorify Him regardless of what He does.* We are really saying, “Father, give me grace to trust you and act like your child whether you say yes or no.” [*or wait...*].

Rules of Prayer – from John Calvin⁷

John Calvin called prayer a “perpetual exercise of faith.” He concluded that there are four rules of prayer which are summarized here. Note that these rules in fact prescribe our attitude:

1. Be reverent, focusing on the will of God [*so that your desire is conformed to it*].
2. Have a sense of your want and sinfulness [*confess your sins and be forgiven*].
3. Acknowledge your need of God's grace and mercy [*depend on God, not yourself*].
4. Be hopeful of success and confident of God's favor [*He's your loving Father*].

In the Name of Christ

Calvin observes that God may be invoked only in the name of Jesus Christ. Any attempt to bypass Christ as our Mediator and Intercessor results in God's wrath. We are not to approach God directly, but only through Christ. We are not to pray through the saints or Mary, but only

⁴ Eph 6:18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. 1 John 5:14-15 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us-whatever we ask-we know that we have what we asked of him. NIV

⁵ Reisinger, John G., *The Sovereignty of God in Prayer* (<http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/topic/sovereignty.html>)

⁶ Rom. 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, {*Some manuscripts God works all things together for good, or God works in all things for the good*} for those who are called according to his purpose. ESV

⁷ Calvin, John, *Of Prayer* (Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book III, Chap. 20).

through Christ. We are not to come before him on our own merits, but only because of Christ. Praying in Christ's name, therefore, is an acknowledgement of the unique role that Jesus Christ plays in our salvation and sanctification. It invests our prayer with the grace of the gospel, and with the authority of Christ.

That being said, praying in Christ's name is not a mantra. It is not part of a formula for prayer. And it is not said thoughtlessly. Matt 18:5 "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." Thus, what we do, we do in consideration of Christ, and for Christ's sake, and as ambassadors for Christ. Matt 18:20 "For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them." Thus we acknowledge Christ as our omnipresent Witness and Judge.⁸ Matt 24:5 "For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many." Thus we are not to exercise authority when it has not been granted to us, nor draw glory to ourselves. John 14:14 "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." Thus we can expect to receive what we need from God's storehouse to accomplish *his* purposes.⁹ John 15:16 "You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. *Then* the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." Thus we may obtain whatever grace we need to produce lasting fruit. John 16:24 "*Until now* you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." Until Christ went to the cross, we could not ask for anything in his name. Thus fulfilled prayer for a Christian is a benefit of Christ's death and resurrection. It is granted in his name, and for his sake.¹⁰

Elements of Prayer - from Dwight L. Moody

"A comprehensive view of the subject will show that there are nine elements which are essential to true prayer... The first is **Adoration**; we cannot meet God on a level at the start. We must approach Him as One far beyond our reach or sight. The next is **Confession**; sin must be put out of the way. We cannot have any communion with God while there is any transgression between us. If there stands some wrong you have done, you cannot expect God's favor until you go to Him and confess the fault. **Restitution** is another; we have to make good the wrong wherever possible. **Thanksgiving** is the next; we must be thankful for what God has done for us already. Then comes **Forgiveness**, and then **Unity**; and then for prayer, such as these things produce, there must be **Faith**. Thus influenced, we shall be ready to offer direct **Petition**. We hear a good deal of praying that is just exhorting, and if you did not see the man's eyes closed, you would suppose he was preaching. Then, much that is called prayer is simply finding fault. There needs to be more petition in our prayers. After all these, there must come **Submission**. While praying, we must be ready to accept the will of God."¹¹

⁸ Christ is with us even when we're alone. We don't need "two or three" as if a quorum were required to receive the blessings of Christ. In the context of Matt. 18:20, an offense has been committed requiring two witnesses so that a judgment may be assessed. "Two or three are gathered in his name" means that they all acknowledge Christ is present as their Witness and their Judge. It is a sign of submission to Christ's authority. In today's American courts, we swear to tell the truth on the Bible as a way to call upon God as our witness, as the One who sees all and knows all. Even outside of church discipline, prayer is a willful submission to his oversight as if bringing our works before him for testing (1Cor. 3:12-13).

⁹ The context of this verse is John 14:12 "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing." This is not a blanket promise to fulfill our fleshly desires for worldly things. If we do what Christ has been doing, then our prayers *toward that end* will be fulfilled.

¹⁰ Heb 5:7 "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission." That's why closing our prayers with "in *your* name" instead of "in the name of Jesus" shows a basic misconception of the godhead. We are not to confuse or equate the persons of the godhead. We pray to the Father, through the Son (in his name), by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). We do not pray to the Son, despite the current trend in the church to do so. To God [the Father] be all glory and honor (1Cor 8:6; Rom 11:36; 1Pet 4:11; 5:11).

¹¹ Moody, Dwight L., "Prevailing Prayer: What Hinders It?"

The End of Prayer

Prayer is the primary means by which we learn submission and obedience. Because God is unchanging, the end or outcome of prayer is necessarily to change us. It is a cooperative venture between the Spirit and us. It involves learning to take advantage of the Spirit's power, supplies, and direction by being *submissive* (Rom. 8:5-14)¹² and *obedient* (Jn. 15:7-10).¹³ Being submissive and obedient are not prerequisites for prayer. They are the outcomes of prayer.

*Prayer is an active effort to submit to the will of God*¹⁴ by intentionally coming under the teaching of his Word (Rom. 12:2; 2Jn. 1:9)¹⁵, relying on the intercession and illumination of his Spirit (Rom. 8:26-27; Eph. 3:5)¹⁶, and in the process, submitting to the Spirit's leading and cleansing (Rom. 8:14; 1Cor. 6:11; 1Thess. 4:3-5).¹⁷

Prayer glorifies God. Someone once told me that we can pray or not pray. God will still ensure that his will is done in this world. But if we don't pray, God won't get the glory. The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.¹⁸ Prayer is one way to give him the glory and the honor due him. When we don't pray, we are refusing to acknowledge his interaction in the world, and his sovereignty over all matters. We might mistakenly think that we fulfilled our own will, or caused our own outcome, independent of God.

And why would we want to submit, and obey, and adopt God's will as our own? Because *we were called according to God's purpose*. We were foreknown by God, and "predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Rom. 8:28-29). It is our very reason for being.

¹² Rom 8:5-14 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ESV

¹³ John 15:7-10 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. NIV

¹⁴ Mk. 3:35 Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother; Rom. 1:10 without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you; 1Pet. 4:2 1 ¶ Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

¹⁵ Rom. 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. 2Jo 1:9 Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ESV

¹⁶ Rom 8:26-27 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Eph 3:4-5 When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ESV

¹⁷ Rom. 8:14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 1Cor. 6:11 But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. 1Thess. 4:3-5 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;

¹⁸ Westminster Larger Catechism. Question and Answer 2.

Our Duty to Pray

We pray because we are *commanded* to pray. “And he spoke a parable to them for this purpose: *so that men should always pray, and not lose heart*” Luke 18:1. This is an imperative to pray. It isn’t an optional activity. We are to pray not only when we can, but also when we should. We don’t just pray when we feel like it, but when we don’t feel like it. We are prone to lose heart, and so we are told to pray to overcome that weakness. This was Christ’s command to the disciples in the garden (Matt. 26:41).¹⁹ They were falling asleep because they were disheartened, not because they were tired. That happens to all of us. Thus, we discipline ourselves to pray.

We are intentional about prayer. We practice it just as we would if we were learning a craft, because praying is a spiritual craft. It is a skill to be honed and polished. It is a weapon employed in the service of God, as well as a defensive shield in the world. We must learn to wield it well.²⁰

We pray because Christ prayed. He is our example, and we are being conformed to his likeness. If he prayed, then we must pray. The church is commanded to pray “without ceasing,” or “continually” (1Thess. 5:17). In Acts 12:5, the church prayed “earnestly.” The Greek word used there is *ektenos* (NT:1618). It literally means “out of stretching forth,” much like an athlete would do as he stretches for the tape at the finish line. We are reaching for the throne of God. Like Jacob, we are wrestling with God himself for our blessing (Gen. 32:24-28).

What Do We Pray For?

We pray for God’s people: As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right (1 Sam 12:23). “Pray one for another” (Jas. 5:16). NIV

We pray for our leaders, Christian and non-Christian alike. As Christians, citizens of our country, we are commanded to pray “for kings, and for all that are in authority” (1 Tim. 2:1–3). To fail to pray for our political and judicial leaders is a sin against our country, and a sin against them as individuals. But even more, it is a sin against God!

We pray for the lost. As we read further in 1Tim. 3:3-4, “God, our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” it is imperative that we intercede for the unsaved also.

We pray for our needs. James 4:2: “You have not, because you ask not.” The Lord Jesus charged Christians, “Ask, and it shall be given you” (Luke 11:9), but we ask not! He stated, “Seek, and ye shall find,” yet we seek not! He continued: “Knock, and it shall be opened unto you,” but we knock not! Thus we have not!

¹⁹ Matt 26:41-43 “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. NIV

²⁰ Study these prayers as models: Jesus’ prayers in Luke 22:39-46 and John 17; Mary’s *Magnificat* in Lk 1:46-55; Solomon in 2Chr 6:14-42; Jehoshaphat in 2Chr 20:5-12; Hezekiah in Isa 37:14-20; Nehemiah in Neh. 1:5-11; and Daniel in Dan 9:4-19.

We pray for our enemies. Christ's prayer for forgiveness for His enemies as He hung on the cross, and Paul's prayer as recorded in Romans 9:1–3.²¹

Why? Because all of these duties are God's will for us.²²

Prayer, God's Will, and the Bible

John 9:31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. (His will is recorded in the Bible)

Acts 22:14 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear words from his mouth.' (His words are written in the Bible)

Eph 1:9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ. (The mystery of his will is revealed in the Bible)

Eph 1:11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. (The purpose of his will is declared in the Bible)

Col 1:9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (The knowledge of his will may be obtained from the Bible)

Heb 13:20-21 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Everything good and pleasing is listed in the Bible)

Eph 1:17-18 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. (That hope, and our inheritance, is proclaimed in the Bible)

Prayer is the means by which we procure the will, the power, and the wisdom to listen attentively and fruitfully to God's instruction through his word.

That's important, because it is through God's word that we are sanctified (Jn. 17:17). We "have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring

²¹ Matt. 5:44-48 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, {*Or brothers and sisters.* The plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated "brothers") refers to siblings in a family. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, *adelphoi* may refer either to *brothers* or to *brothers and sisters*} what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

²² Excerpted from *The Shameful Sin of Prayerlessness* by Dr. Fred M. Barlow

word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, (Col 3:16) All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth (Col 1:6).

Prayer and Meditation

Prayer is often linked with meditation. That's for two reasons.

- The first is that we need to gather our thoughts before approaching the throne of our Creator. We pray “in the Spirit,” which means by his power and direction.²³ It is an act of submission which requires that our hearts be prepared. We consider the majesty and the holiness of God, and our unworthiness apart from Christ. We sink into the robe of Christ, considering his righteousness and his atoning blood. Then we approach the Throne of Grace to have the benefits of his sacrifice applied to us in the form of forgiveness and a cleansed conscience.
- The second reason is that we need to meditate on the Word of God in order to consider his truth. After all, we're required to pray according to the will of God as revealed in his word, and to pray for wisdom with regard to that. A news reporter would not approach the president of the United States without having prepared himself ahead of time. We pray with the end in mind. When we close our prayer “In the name of Christ” we are affirming that we have done everything in our power to conform to the will of God, under the authority of Christ, by the power of the Spirit. In other words, we are establishing an attitude of Christlike prayer.

Even when we launch into spontaneous prayer, we should consider our words and our ways. We are not to babble thoughtlessly, inconsiderately, hoping that our many words will impress God or vaunt our spirituality before men (Ecc. 5:7; 10:14; Matt. 6:7). Yes, God is our Father; but He is also God. The child who interrupts his parent because he feels compelled to speak and to be heard must learn to control himself, and to wait. Prayer is listening more than it is speaking. It responds to God's word more than it initiates a novel conversation: *sola scriptura*.

Therefore, we do not want to come before God empty-minded, prayerfully waiting for some voice to give us direction. It's true that we know God's voice because we are his children. But if we are given some spiritual direction that runs counter to God's word, it cannot be from God. *That's why we talk to God through prayer, and why he talks to us through his word*. Expecting a two-way private conversation with God during prayer is potentially dangerous, and frankly, it is presumptuous. If we are not familiar with his word, then his Spirit cannot bring Scripture to bear as Christ brought it to bear during his temptation in the desert. In prayer, we enter into the spiritual realm where we need to wear our full armor, carrying both sword and shield.

²³ Praying “in the Spirit” does not mean praying in tongues (which will be addressed shortly). To understand its meaning, it may be helpful to contrast it with praying in the flesh (based on the contrast between Spirit and flesh spoken of in Rom. 8:8-9). If I were to pray in the flesh, I would be seeking to satisfy the desires of my flesh, allowing it to master me, and submitting to its every whim. By contrast, if I pray in the Spirit, I am seeking to satisfy the desires of the Spirit (to do the will of God), allowing the Spirit to govern me, and submitting to his prompting and direction. More than that, when my flesh governs me, it is out of weakness on my part. But when the Spirit governs me, it results in supernatural power rising up within me, not weakness. On my own, I lack the strength, the will, and the determination to subdue my body (1Cor. 9:27). But in the Spirit, I have all the resources of heaven at my disposal, the very strength and power of Christ, who lives in me. This isn't mumbo-jumbo, or some transcendent experience. Praying in the Spirit is willfully submitting to his direction through God's Word, and intentionally setting aside my own agenda. It is opening up to his examination of my heart (Ps. 139:23), and allowing his assessment to convict my conscience.

Thus, meditation is the point at which we submit to the Spirit in order to solicit from God all that we need, while relying on Christ alone as our mediator in the process. These things are intentionally considered, and rationally acknowledged in our preparatory meditation.

Caution 1: God is *not* our Inner Being

TM, transcendental meditation, has returned to the Christian scene. In a search for spirituality, many are resurrecting the monastic and mystic practices of the Catholic Church. There are loads of books on the topic, mostly by Catholic authors. But now a number of evangelical authors are also getting on the bandwagon. You'll hear of *lectio divina*, centering prayer, and contemplative prayer advocated by Thomas Keating, Richard Foster, Ken Blanchard, Dallas Willard, and a number of others. It's a throwback to the Rule of Benedict in the 6th century, and the later practices of Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Madame Guyon (circa 17th century). Thomas Keating popularized it in the 1970's after "rediscovering" the *Cloud of Unknowing* by a 14th c. author. It sets aside the mind, emotions, and judgment, and opens the spirit to receiving direction (direct intuition), often stimulated by the repetition of a phrase. This is also called the *Zen of Meditation* by the Benedictine monks.

Here's an assessment of the technique by Rev. John D. Dreher (a Catholic monk):

Many people assume centering prayer is compatible with Catholic tradition, but in fact the techniques of centering prayer are neither Christian nor prayer. They are at the level of human faculties and as such are an operation of man, not of God. The deception and dangers can be grave.

Centering prayer differs from Christian prayer in that the intent of the technique is to bring the practitioner to the center of his *own being*. There he is, supposedly, to experience the presence of the God who indwells him. Christian prayer, on the contrary, centers upon God in a *relational* way, as someone apart from oneself. The Christian knows a God who is personal, yet who, as Creator, infinitely transcends his creature. God is wholly other than man. It is also crucial to Christian prayer that God engages man's whole being in response, not just his interior life. In the view of centering prayer, the immanence of God somehow makes the transcendence of God available to human techniques and experience.

<http://www.saint-mike.org/Library/Occult/CenteringPrayer.html>

Here's a definition of contemplative prayer given by one of its advocates:

Christian Contemplative Prayer is the opening of mind and heart - our whole being - to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words and emotions, whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, thinking, feeling and choosing; even closer than consciousness itself. The root of all prayer is interior silence. Though we think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words, this is only one expression. Contemplative Prayer is a prayer of silence, an experience of God's presence as the ground in which our being is rooted, the Source from whom our life emerges at every moment.

<http://www.centeringprayer.com/>

When you hear "beyond thoughts," you are hearing something other than reformed theology. Paul says in 1Co 14:15 "What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also." When someone asks you to set your mind adrift, or let go of your reason, it is a danger sign. Many today believe we can use Catholic practices without falling into Catholic error. That's what the Hebrews believed when they adopted Canaanite practices. That's what the Roman Catholics believed

when they absorbed a number of pagan rites into Christianity. They thought they could substitute Christian symbols and objects for those of the pagans without contaminating their faith. They were wrong. Syncretism²⁴ is an alluring lie. It's a snare and a trap (Jos 23:9-16). God says to come out from among such idols (2Cor. 6:16-17); he doesn't say to adapt them for our use.

Caution 2: God is *not* our “Buddy”

One aberration of modern evangelicalism is the idea that Jesus, or God, is somehow our buddy. We can chit-chat with him as if we were at the kitchen table. When the Bible says that Abraham was a friend of God, it doesn't mean he could give him a slap on the back and crack jokes with him. That is never the image we are given in Scripture. Consider the danger that Moses was in when God revealed himself to him. God had to place Moses in the cleft of the rock and show him only his back lest he die (Ex. 33:22). When Jesus called his disciples his friends, it wasn't that they became his equal and were then free to rebuke him, ignore him, or give him their advice (Matt 16:22-23, “Get behind me, Satan”). We must maintain our distance, treating God with respect, caution, consideration, and humility. We approach his throne with confidence, not because we're buddies, but because of God's great promises, and the covering of Christ.

Calvin's first rule of prayer is to approach God with **reverence**, not familiarity. Remember what your mother taught you: *familiarity breeds contempt*. Recall the trouble that Job got into by saying his condition was unwarranted. He demanded to have his day in court before the Maker of Heaven and Earth. When he finally got his day in the presence of God, he was in such awe and wonder that he couldn't speak. Recall the sons of Aaron who approached the altar without permission. They were consumed (Lev. 10:1). “Fear the One who has the power to throw body and soul into hell” (Matt. 10:28). We are to tremble, and yet we are also to be confident:

*Tremble and sin not: think in your mind, lying down, and be still. [Selah]
Sacrifice offerings of righteousness, and have confidence in Jehovah. Psalm 4:4-5*

Speaking in Tongues – Private prayer language

Entire books have been written on this subject. There is no way to give it the proper attention it deserves here. I will only say that it is controversial, yet Paul did not condemn it. Instead, he regulated it. The issue is this: what does “praying in tongues” mean? Is it a known language, or is it ecstatic speech? As I've examined the Scriptural text, it appears to be the first because it's invariably linked to prophesying – so it must be understood. I don't practice it, nor have I experienced it. But I know a number of Charismatic brothers and sisters who do. The principal passage used in support of it is 1Cor. 14. It contains ambiguous text, especially verse 2. Even so, seven principles may be deduced concerning the purpose and use of tongues:

1. Tongues are unintelligible to others (v. 2), and won't edify unless interpreted (v. 5).
2. Speaking or praying in tongues should not be done publicly unless it edifies others.
3. Prophecy is to be sought and preferred over speaking in tongues because it edifies.
4. Whenever tongues are used in the church, there must be an interpreter present (to edify).
5. Whenever tongues are used in the church, it is limited to two or three *prophets* at a time.

²⁴ Syncretism is adapting your belief system to another belief system; combining or reconciling differing beliefs.

6. Whenever tongues are used in the church for *prophecy*, it is to be regulated and reviewed for content (v. 40: it must be “fitting and orderly” – not exercised with abandon).
7. And yet, tongues are not to be forbidden (v. 39).²⁵

“Prophecy” means clearly explaining the truth of God *as presented in his word*. It is never new revelation. You should know that the tradition of the church since the 2nd century (as found in the writings of Eusebius c. 325AD) is that speaking in tongues was an extraordinary gift; and all extraordinary gifts died with the Apostles’ generation. They were used to certify the Apostles and their designees to the early church, not to identify or characterize all believers. However, this passage indicates a non-Apostolic practice of the gift. Charismatics say there has been a rekindling of extraordinary gifts in our time. As if to confirm that, a number of missionaries report that extraordinary gifts are appearing in overseas churches. But experience, like tradition, is not our standard of truth.

I will only offer the same caution with this practice that I gave for contemplative prayer: don’t let go of your mind or the text of Scripture. If you don’t know what you’re praying or saying, it is best that you set it aside. It provides no value to you, and it cannot edify the church. It isn’t the mark of the Spirit’s presence,²⁶ so don’t worry if you haven’t got the gift. Most of us don’t.

Prayerlessness as an Indicator of our Spiritual Condition

When we don’t pray for extended periods of time it is often an indicator of spiritual weakness:

- We may have become self-sufficient
- We may suffer from unbelief, wrong beliefs, or outright rebellion
- We may have stopped reading God’s word, and thus have no material with which to pray
- We may suffer from doubt, worry, or mistrust
- We may have succumbed to habitual sin, and are embarrassed to come before God

There is a single word for all of these. It is *sin*, and we must repent of it. How? By praying.

Summary

Prayer is necessary for *every* Christian. It should be cherished and practiced daily. It is a privilege granted to us by God Almighty. May we learn to pray according to God’s will as revealed in his word, and in the power of the Spirit. May we always pray in the name of Christ, acknowledging him as the only door through which we may enter into God’s presence (Jn. 10:9). He tore in half the veil that formerly excluded us from the Holy of Holies, and became that veil himself (Matt. 27:51; Heb. 6:19; 9:3; 10:20). Because of that, we may now approach the throne of God with confidence (Heb. 4:16), knowing that our Father delights in us, because he delights in the Son (Eph. 3:11,12). In God, we live, and move, and have our being (Acts 17:28). He has called us into communion with him (1Jn. 1:3). Why would we separate ourselves from Him by failing to pray, or close our ears to him by failing to read his Word (Ps. 119)? Therefore, let us come into his presence with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise (Ps. 95:2; 100:4).

²⁵ Paul writes in 1Cor. 14:18 “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.” The text clearly does not say, “I speak in more tongues than all of you.” That might suggest ecstatic speech since Paul spoke a number of languages, but I would disagree with that conclusion.

²⁶ Verses 21-22 say that speaking in tongues is a sign for un-believers, and not for believers. Isaiah 28 (espec. v.11) indicates that when God speaks to Israel with a foreign tongue (as happened at Pentecost in Acts 2), it will be a sign to them that they have fallen from His favor, that they are behaving like drunkards, and that He will call to be His people those who were not His people, i.e. the Gentiles (Rom 9:25-26).