

1-1-1983

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Recommended Citation

Foster, Richard J. (1983) "A Life of Prayer and Holy Obedience," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 55, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol55/iss1/2>

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A Life of Prayer and Holy Obedience

RICHARD J. FOSTER

In an existential sense, prayer brings us into the holy of holies in the Christian life. We move from the periphery to the center.

Edward Payson said: "Prayer is the first thing, the second thing, the third thing necessary to a minister. Pray, then, my dear brother; pray, pray, pray." Sir Thomas Buxton wrote: "You know the value of prayer; it is precious beyond all price. Never, never neglect it." William Penn said of George Fox: "Above all he excelled in prayer. . . . The most awful, living, reverent frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was his in prayer." Archbishop Tait said: "I want a life of greater, deeper, truer prayer." Martin Luther declared: "To pray well is the better half of study." And E. M. Bounds called it the great need for the church: "What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organization or more and novel methods, but men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans but men — men of prayer."¹

Most pertinent of all to our subject are the words of William Carey: "Prayer — secret, fervent, believing prayer — lies at the root of all personal godliness."²

Just to underscore how far removed we are from the concern of these witnesses, consider what it would be like to implement the proposal of Adoniram Judson in our daily lives: "Arrange thy affairs, if possible, so that thou canst leisurely devote two or three hours every day not merely to devotional exercises but to the very act of secret prayer and communion with God. Endeavor seven times a day to with-

Presented at the Southern Baptist-Quaker colloquy, Berea, Kentucky, June 25-27, 1981.

draw from business and company and lift up thy soul to God in private retirement. Begin the day by rising after midnight and devoting some time amid the silence and darkness of the night to this sacred work. Let the hour of opening dawn find thee at the same work. Let the hours of nine, twelve, three, six, and nine at night witness the same. Be resolute in this cause. Make all practical sacrifices to maintain it."³ Words like these convince me that I have a great deal to learn about communion with God.

PRAYER COMPELS US INTO HOLY OBEDIENCE

My first point is a simple one: Prayer compels us into holy obedience!

The primary purpose of prayer is not to give us spiritual goosebumps. It is not to titillate our fancies with visions and dreams and manifold revelations. These are by-products of something much deeper, more profound. The primary purpose of prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that we are conformed into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. We are taken over, changed, transformed inwardly.

Douglas Steere has said: "To pray means to change."⁴ Frankly, none of us will keep up the work of prayer for long unless we are prepared to change. We will either give it up, or we will turn it into a little system that keeps the form of godliness but denies the power of it — which is the same thing as giving it up. For if in prayer we have not moved into the life and power of the Spirit of God, then we are not in prayer.

When we begin to walk with God, he is gracious and marvelously answers our feeble, egocentric, greed-motivated prayers. And we think, "Hallelujah, this is wonderful! God is alive." But after a time, when we try to push that button again, God says: "Wait a minute! I will be your Teacher and lead you into a more excellent way. I want to set you free of your greed and avarice, your fear and hostility." We may chafe under that and struggle against it for a while, but in time we come to learn the goodness of God's grace, and the way in which he sets us free from bondage to ourselves. In

place of the stifling preoccupation with self, and always needing to get our own way, liberating graces begin to enable us to care deeply for the needs of others. Most wonderful of all, we can lay down the crushing burden of always trying to conform to the opinions of others.

François Fénelon witnessed: "With this purity of heart, we are no longer troubled by what others think of us, except that in charity we avoid scandalizing them."⁸ We do not have to be liked. We do not have to succeed. We can enjoy obscurity as easily as fame. We begin to understand the meaning of self-denial. We begin to live in communion. Worship. Adoration. We begin to walk in holy obedience. We begin to think as God would have us think. We begin to desire his ways, not out of obligation, but because that is what we truly want.

Holy obedience is that ability to come into the life of God in such a way that God's will becomes our will, and it is really difficult to live outside holy obedience. We begin to care and love the way he cares and loves. The words of the old hymn, "He walks with me and He talks with me," cease to be pious jargon and become a wondrous, glorious reality. We are compelled into holy obedience. All the saints have testified that this is so.

Consider the biblical witness.

Think of Abraham — called out of Ur of the Chaldees by the living voice of God. Slowly, painfully — howbeit with many reversals — he learned to live under guidance. Because he desired communion, he came into obedience. Slowly he grew into holy obedience until he came to that great turning point recorded in Genesis 15. (Many feel that Genesis 22 — when he was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac — is the high point of the Abraham story, but the real turning point came earlier, in Genesis 15.) It was then that Abraham had his little discussion with God, questioning and wondering, "How can you make this great people out of someone who has no heir?" God replies so forcefully that he *will* make him a great nation, that Abraham believes. After that he is willing to obey God's instructions to build the altar and prepare the sacrifice. He has learned unquestioning obedience.

Or think of Joseph — sheaves bowing down to him; sun, moon, and stars bowing down to him. Joseph says: "How can a person be humble with dreams like that?" God answers: "I'll show you!" Imagine what Joseph went through before he learned to walk in holy obedience. Something had to happen in his life to enable him to have compassion toward the brothers who had so shamefully wronged him.

Or think of the psalmist David who had come into communion with the Father and through it *learned* obedience. He could write, "The Lord is my shepherd," and then cry out later, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight." Slowly, slowly, slowly, he learned that "the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, Oh God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51: 4, 17 RSV).

So many others could be mentioned: Jeremiah and Isaiah, Hezekiah and Josiah, the Apostles Peter and Paul. For all of them the words of Romans 8:29 were true: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (RSV).

And so it is with us. Prayer — that wonderful gift of conversation between a finite spirit and the infinite Spirit of the universe — will drive us into holy obedience.

If all of this sounds harsh, rigorous, somber, then we have missed the point. Joy, not grit, is the hallmark of holy obedience. We need to be lighthearted in what we do, avoid taking ourselves too seriously, cheerfully revolt against self and pride, be jubilant, carefree, merry! Utter abandonment to God must be made freely and accompanied by celebration. Enjoy this ministry of self-surrender! Hold this work lightly, joyfully!

The saints through the ages have witnessed to this reality. Think of St. Francis, the poor little friar of Assisi, inebriated with the love of God and filled with ecstasy. Those early Franciscans walked in holy obedience with the most incredible exuberance and merry abandon. Jubilant, they lived wrapped in God by the overflow of divine grace which descended upon them. Julian of Norwich, in her beautiful *Revelations of Divine Love*, said that she was filled with "delight and serenity so blessed and so powerful that there is no fear, no sorrow,

no pain, physical or spiritual, that one could suffer which might have disturbed me.”⁶ Blaise Pascal wrote: “Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.”⁷ And on march the witnesses.

It is truly a wonder, this living in communion, this hearing his voice and obeying his word. It makes all the plastic extravagances of our modern religious world seem pale by comparison, and so they are. Prayer compels us into holy obedience!

PRAYER DRAWS US INTO TRUST

A second reality which we need to underline is that prayer draws us into trust!

My children like pancakes. Every now and then I get up early to fix them a batch. It is interesting to watch those boys wolf down pancakes as if there were an endless supply. They are not worried one whit about the price of eggs, or my ability to provide them with pancakes. Not once have I seen them slipping some into their pockets, thinking, “I don’t know about Dad; I had better stash away a few just in case there are no pancakes tomorrow.” As far as they are concerned, the reservoir of pancakes is infinite. All they need to do is ask, and, if it is in their best interest, they know they will receive. They live in trust. Now it is the work of prayer that it brings us into this posture of trust. Without this spirit of trust it will be impossible to live on the basis of prayer for daily bread. No, we will need an adequate stash somewhere — just in case! But be assured that what we have now is *never* adequate.

The life of trust which comes through prayer frees us from our greed. Remember the words of James: “Where do these wars and battles between yourselves first start? Isn’t it precisely in the desires fighting inside your own selves? You want something and you haven’t got it; so you are prepared to kill. You have an ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force.” That is the way of the world in which we live. That is the spirit of the flesh. Then James goes on to describe another way, a more excellent way, the way of the Kingdom of God: “Why you don’t have what you want is

because you don’t pray for it” (Jas. 4:1-2 JerB). It is the way of prayer which brings us into the life of trust and sets us free from our greed. James goes on (v. 3) to add: “When you do pray and don’t get it, it is because you have not prayed properly, you have prayed for something to indulge your own desires.”

Many of us, as we are moving into holy obedience, have not yet had the spirit of greed removed and been able to enter into this life of trust. But as we move along we’re set free from the need to desire things that do not please God and are not consistent with his way. As we grow and enter into holy obedience and its necessary partner, trust, there are many things which we simply do not need and so we no longer ask. We are able to cast all our care upon him because we know that he cares for us. We live in trust!

Trust defeats the spirit of climb, push, and shove. In trust we are set free from the spirit of fear: Fear that inflation will overtake us. Fear that we won’t have enough. Fear that we will be left out in the cold. Fear that the communists will overtake us. Fear that the American Baptists will overtake us. Fear that the Hicksite Quakers will overtake us. Fear! Fear! Fear! In the ministry of prayer we are freed from fear. “God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7 KJV).

Most wonderful of all, the trust that comes through a life of prayer gives us the marvelous Christian grace of contentment. Gone is the need to strain and pull to get ahead. In rushes the glorious indifference to position, status, or possession. Living out of this wonderful center causes all other concerns to fade into insignificance. St. Paul was so utterly immersed in this reality that from a Roman prison he could write (Phil. 4:11 TEV): “I have learned to be satisfied with what I have. I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough.” Whether he was in need or had more than enough, in prison or free, was a matter of indifference to him. Plenty and hunger, abundance and want were immaterial to this little Jew with the Titan soul. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” he said. And so he lived.

What a beautiful freedom this contentment is! Contentment means to opt out of the status race and the maddening pace that is its necessary partner. We can shout, "No!" to the insanity which chants: "More, more, more!" We can rest contented with what God graciously provides.

One day as I was passing some very expensive homes, I began pondering our perennial tendency to want something bigger, better, more plush. At the same time, I was monitoring the rise of covetousness in my own spirit as I admired these homes. I carried on a little inward dialogue. Was it possible, I wondered, to come to the place where you do not desire more house, even if you can afford it? Couldn't you decide on a particular economic livability level and rest contented with that, even if your income exceeded that considerably? The response was swift: "Oh, yes! It is not necessary to crave more. You can live contented with what you have, with no further desire to accumulate more." I'm quite sure that I have not attained this holy contentment, but from time to time I have known a measure of its liberating graces and have found it a wonderful resting place.

What misery comes into our lives by our restless, gnawing greed. We plunge ourselves into enormous debt and then take two or three jobs to stay afloat. We uproot our families with unnecessary moves just so we can have a prestigious house or a better position. We grasp and grab and never get enough. And most destructive of all, our flashy cars and sports spectacles and backyard pools have a way of crowding out much interest in civil rights or inner-city poverty or the starved masses of India. Greed has a way of severing the cords of compassion. How clearly the Apostle Paul saw this when he warned that our lust for wealth causes us to fall into "many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction."

But we do not need to be captive to avarice. We can be ushered into a life of peace and serenity. With Paul we can say: "If we have food or clothing, with these we shall be content." And it is only as that kind of contentment informs our lives that we are able to speak with prophetic vigor to a greedy, covetous, war-racked world. Think of the words of Paul in Phil. 4:5b-7 (NIV): "The Lord is near. Do not be anxious

about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Prayer draws us into trust!

PRAYER INVITES US INTO COMPASSION

We need to mention a third inner occurrence in the life of prayer. Prayer invites us into compassion!

It is prayer that gives us the power to sense the spirits in people. As we learn to walk with God and live this life of perpetual communion, we come into a gentleness by which we love all people. And there comes stealing in an amazing discernment which enables us to see what is inside people. We come to see this not out of curiosity or because it will give us some kind of leverage over them, but so that we might enter into their fears, into their hostilities, into their bitterness, and heal these by the Light of God.

In 2 Kings 4 there is the story of the Shunammite woman who came to Elisha in desperation because her son was dying. And do you recall what Elisha said (v. 27): "She is in bitter distress; and the Lord has hidden it from me, and has not told me"? He was surprised that he did not know of her trouble, because evidently he often did know when people were in distress. Similarly, in John 2 we are told that Jesus knew what was in people, and we are given three beautiful examples: Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and the nobleman.

Are you able to enter into the spirits of people and see what controls them? At one committee meeting when I was first learning to pray for people, I noticed a person who seemed to be filled with hurt and bitterness. I decided to pray for her. I didn't say anything, but simply lifted her into the Light of Christ. The meeting went on for about three hours and she was constantly making little jabs — little verbal stabs of hostility — especially toward one young couple in the group. I thought, "I must not be doing very well in this prayer project." But just before the meeting came to a close she turned and said to the group: "Would you people be willing to pray for me before we go home?" And then she began to cry, and out it came —

all the hurt and bitterness. Then the young couple who had been able to receive her hostility got up and stood beside her and prayed one of the most beautiful prayers of healing and peace that I have ever heard. I felt I was standing on holy ground. I was! The peaceable gospel of Christ came in, in that little experience.

This way of prayer and walking with God, and living in perpetual communion with God, not only helps us to know other people, but all of the creation. It gives us the gentleness by which we come to love the little creatures of the earth, and even the earth itself. Have you ever walked along and felt the earth groaning and crying for redemption and healing? I hope you pray for the peace and healing of Christ to come into the earth. We pour out our poisons into the ground and waters, and slap pavement over everything, and rape the earth. There is need for those who will pray for the healing of the earth.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about some kind of sloppy sentimentalism, some kind of mushy peace that wants to avoid conflict at all costs. The peaceable gospel of Jesus Christ brings the sword of the Spirit that divides and judges. As we enter into the spirits of people we become incensed at the poverty and injustice and evil in human society. We seek to call people to relinquish all vested interests, all anger and hostility, all prejudice and fear. We sense deeply the incarnated nature of structural evil and we seek its defeat in the power of the Lamb.

PRAYER LEADS US INTO CONQUEST

This leads to my fourth and final point. Prayer leads us into conquest! The peaceable gospel of Jesus Christ is not passivism. Prayer enables us to wage the peaceable war of the Lamb against all principalities.

That marvelous passage in Ephesians 6 describes our spiritual warfare. Paul writes: "Put on all the armor that God gives you, so that you will be able to stand up against the Devil's evil tricks. For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age" (vv. 11-12, TEV). By that Paul does not mean that flesh

and blood are unimportant. He simply means that behind the flesh and blood, and controlling them, are powers and principalities that insinuate themselves into flesh and blood.

When we approach the absentee landlord of ghetto apartments, we speak to the principality of greed which controls him. When we confront political policy makers or corporate executives, we do so with an inward strength born out of prayer and fasting, seeking to defeat the inward spirit of vested interests and covetousness. Paul describes the marvelous armor which we are given — the loins of truth — the breastplate of righteousness — having our feet shod with the gospel of peace — the shield of faith — the helmet of salvation — the sword of the spirit. Then Paul's metaphor gives out, but that doesn't stop him, he just keeps on listing our weapons, especially stressing prayer: "At every opportunity pray in the Spirit, using prayers and petitions of every sort" (Eph. 6:18 NAB).

What we fail so often to understand is the fact that these weapons are incredibly powerful, more powerful than B-1 bombers, Trident missile systems, and MX missile systems — if we will only learn how to equip ourselves and train ourselves to use them effectively. No weapons system is effective unless you have learned how to use it. I am often drawn to those powerful words of James Nayler: "He [Christ] puts spiritual weapons into their hearts and hands . . . to make war with his enemies, conquering and to conquer, not as the prince of this world . . . with whips and prisons, tortures and torments on the bodies of creatures, to kill and destroy men's lives . . . but with the word of truth . . . returning love for hatred, wrestling with God against the enmity, with prayers and tears night and day, with fasting, mourning and lamentation, in patience, in faithfulness, in truth, in love unfeigned, in long suffering, and in all the fruits of the Spirit, that if by any means he may overcome evil with good."⁸

Think of that beautiful story in 2 Kings 6 and 7 when Syria was warring on Israel. The king of Syria would set his battle plans, then he would find out that Israel already knew about them. He tried to find out where the leak was, and discovered that God was giving his plans to Elisha by revelation.

So he sent a whole battalion out to capture one man. And the next morning Elisha's servant woke up and saw this huge army with horses and chariots surrounding the entire city, and he was of course petrified. But Elisha said, "Relax," and he prayed, "Lord, open his eyes and let him see" what the real situation was. And the Lord opened the servant's eyes so that he "saw the hillside covered with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha," the huge army of God.

Then Elisha prayed that the Lord would strike the Syrians blind. When they couldn't see, Elisha told them they had come to the wrong place, and he said to let him show them where to go, and led them right into the middle of Samaria. Of course the armies of Israel gathered around them, and Elisha prayed, "Lord, give them their eyesight back," and they could see again. Immediately they realized the situation was hopeless and they surrendered. And the king of Israel said, "Ho, ho, we got 'em; Elisha, shall I let them have it?" And listen to this — this is the Old Testament! Elisha said, "Oh, no. Feed them lunch and send them home." And that of course ended the war. Now that is power!

I know what you're saying: "Obviously I'm not Elisha." My answer is, "Why not?" God is looking for people who will live in the life and the power of the Spirit in such a way that they will do the kind of things Elisha did, not specifically in the way that Elisha did them, because we live in a different kind of world, but in a way that will follow in his steps. Prayer gets us in touch with the power source, and when we have our hearts straight, God can use us in wonderful ways.

Frank Laubach, a great missionary in the early part of this century, tells how a small group gathered to pray for Franklin Roosevelt in the difficult days of World War II. They set a picture of Roosevelt on the fireplace mantle. Then they gathered around it in order to be channels of the light and power of Jesus Christ into this man. Rufus Jones, who was a member of the group, led them in what Laubach described as one of the most powerful prayers he had ever experienced. As they were finishing, the telephone rang. It was President Roosevelt wanting to speak to one of the group and seek his counsel!

Now, none of us can prove that that time of prayer had anything to do with the phone call. All I know is that when people begin to move in this way, wonderful things start to happen. We need to seek this work of prayer, applying it specifically to the world in which we live, not in any attempt to get our own way, nor to make our little pet projects come to pass, but so that the goodness of God can be spread abroad in the hearts of men and women.

We live in a war-racked world. Are we applying the weapons of Ephesians 6, particularly the weapon of prayer, to the task of bringing the everlasting gospel of peace to this world?

In a course on prayer at Friends University, I tell the students that we have to have experiments. You can't work at prayer without lab experiments. One of the first of these is to learn to pray for the city of Wichita. I tell them just to walk down the street praying for the city, praying for the people. Or ride the bus anonymously for a whole day, just praying to the backs of the heads of people. Then walk on the school grounds and pray for the children, surrounding them with the love and protection of Christ, sealing them with his cross. You don't tell them that you are doing it. You just do it.

Try swishing prayers around a room full of people to lift them up and encourage them. Pray that justice will come, that God will raise up a people to serve this need or solve that one. Or do we really believe these things?

My Episcopalian friend, Agnes Sanford, was with a group in Paris in 1967 at the outbreak of what we now call the Six Day War in the Middle East. They were out in front of Notre Dame Cathedral with their French guide when the news of the war came across the airwaves. Their guide exclaimed: "Oh, no, things are going to happen again just as they did in World War II." And Agnes responded in her characteristically authoritative way: "Oh, no, they're not. We won't let them!" She took the little group inside Notre Dame and asked God to stop that war, to end it quickly, and to bring peace to that area of the world so that it would not engulf the whole world again.

We can't prove that her prayer helped or had any effect whatever. But we can't prove that it didn't!

Wonderful things can happen if we'll learn to walk with God — if we'll learn to pray. I know that there are incredibly great problems about that war and everything that has happened since — in terms of justice, in terms of refugees, in terms of Palestinian problems, land, and all of that. I'm just trying to say that if we'll come to walk with God, he will lead us to act in a way that can make a difference in the world in which we live.

If we're willing. If we're willing. If we're willing.

Notes

1. The Penn quotation is from his "Preface" to the *Journal of George Fox*, 8th (Bi-Centenary) edn., ed. by Norman Penney (London: Headley, 1902), pp. xlvii-xlviii. All other quotations are from E. M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), pp. 60, 38, 13, 8.
2. Bounds, p. 23.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
4. This is found in Douglas V. Steere's "Introduction" to Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), p. 9.
5. Francois de Salignac de La Mothe-Fenelon (1651-1715), *Christian Perfection* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), pp. 198-199.
6. Julian of Norwich (c.1342 - after 1413), *Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 205.
7. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), *Love Aflame: Selections from the Writings of Blaise Pascal* (Wilmore, Ky.: Asbury Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 3.
8. James Nayler (c.1618-1660), *A Collection of Sundry Books, Epistles, and Papers Written by James Nayler* (London: 1716), p. 378.

A PRAYER FOR PEACE

The eternal God rebuke (I beseech you) the wrath of man,
and humble all under the sense of the evil of this day.
And yet (unworthy as we are) give us Peace,
for His holy name's sake!

William Penn, 1688 (*Works*, vol. 1, p. 86)