

Pray Without Ceasing: Practical Steps

Richard Foster writes that Breath Prayer and Brother Andrew's, *The Practice of the Presence of God* are the two "fundamental expressions of Unceasing Prayer" developed by the church. This document has his excellent section on Breath Prayer that I have used to develop Breath Prayer in my devotional life. This is followed by an explanation of Brother Andrew's work that I would have liked to include in my sermon but time would not allow.

I trust that you will be blessed as you explore and wonder what "praying without ceasing" might look like for you.

Blessings

Douglas

Breath Prayer¹

As Christians over the centuries have sought to follow the biblical injunction to "pray without ceasing", they have developed two fundamental expressions of Unceasing Prayer. The one is more formal and liturgical; the other is more conversational and spontaneous. The first has its origin in the Eastern Christian hesychastic tradition and is usually called aspiratory prayer or breath prayer. The idea has its roots in the Psalms where a repeated phrase reminds us of an entire Psalm, for example, "O LORD, you have searched me and known me" (Ps. 139:1). As a result, the concept arose of a short, simple prayer of petition that can be spoken in one breath, hence the name "breath prayer". Gregory of Sinai says, "One's love of God should run before breathing."

The most famous of the breath prayers is the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." As you can tell, this prayer is derived from Jesus' parable on self-righteousness, in which the tax collector beat his chest and prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). It came together in its present form and was used extensively in the sixth century and was revived in the Eastern Church in the fourteenth century.

In the nineteenth century an anonymous Russian peasant tells the moving story of his search to pray without ceasing in *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Once he learned the Jesus Prayer, he prayed it continuously until the prayer moved from his mind into his heart and finally throughout his whole body - becoming so internalized that it was present with him at all times, whether he was awake or asleep. This particular book has had an influence upon Christians far beyond the borders of the Eastern Church.

But the Jesus Prayer is only one example.. It is also possible to discover your own individual breath prayer. One evening some years ago I was out jogging, when a dozen or more breath prayers poured forth from my lips. Here are a few

¹ from *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* by Richard Foster (pages 128-130)

of those prayers that came tumbling out that Bummer evening: "O Lord, baptize me with love"; "Teach me gentleness, Father"; "Jesus, let me receive your grace"; "Gracious Master, remove my fear"; "Reveal my sin, O Holy Spirit"; "Lord Jesus, help me feel loved."

Notice the brevity of each of the prayers - seldom more than seven or eight syllables. Also, note the sense of nearness and intimacy: God is addressed in a close, personal way. See too how the person praying expresses dependence, docility, trust - the opposite of self-reliance. Then notice that the prayers are all requests. This is self-focused prayer in the sense that we are asking something to be done in us or to us. But it is not self-centered prayer, for the requests of breath prayer are seasoned reflections on the will and ways of God.

Breath prayer is discovered more than created. We are asking God to show us his will, his way, his truth for our Present need.

Here is one way you can discover a breath prayer 10, yourself. Find some uninterrupted time and a quiet place and sit in silence, being held in God's loving presence. After a few moments allow God to call you by name: "Christy", "Nathan", "Joel", "Tess", "Carolynn", "Richard", "Lynda", "Joy". Next, allow this question to surface: "What do you want?" Answer this question simply and directly. Maybe a single word will come to your conscious mind: "peace" or "faith", "strength". Perhaps it will be a phrase: "to understand your truth", "to feel your love". Next, connect this phrase with the most comfortable way you have of speaking about God: "blessed Saviour", "Abba", "Immanuel", "Holy Father", "gracious Lord". Finally, you will want to write out your breath prayer, staying within what is comfortable to say in one breath.

Over the next few days allow God to adjust your breath prayer ever so slightly. You may have written down, "Help me understand your truth, Lord." But after a day or two of prayer, you realize that what you really need is not so much to understand God's truth as to live God's truth. Hence you begin praying, "Help me live your truth, Lord."

Begin praying your breath prayer as often as possible. Allow God to plant it deep into the depths of your spirit. Do not rush or change prayers too quickly. Eight months ago I received a personal breath prayer and as yet I have no indication that the work is finished. Sometimes - not always, but sometimes - we reach a point beyond this prayer where we are stilled within and without. Christ is before us, Christ is behind us, Christ surrounds us and is through us. This is a point where we let go of our labour and be with God.

Commenting on breath prayers, Theophane the Recluse notes, "Thoughts continue to jostle in your head like mosquitoes. To stop this jostling you must bind the mind with one thought, or the thought of One only. An aid to this is a short prayer, which helps the mind to become simple and unified."

Brother Lawrence: The Practice of the Presence of God²

When it comes to “praying without ceasing” then you could go no further than the 15th century monk Brother Lawrence and his writing. In their community life together Monks had both spiritual and practical responsibilities.

Brother Lawrence was assigned to the monastery kitchen where, amidst the tedious chores of cooking and cleaning at the constant bidding of his superiors, he sought ways of praying without ceasing. He wrote "Men invent means and methods of coming at God's love, they learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God's presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business wholly for the love of him?"

For Brother Lawrence, "common business," no matter how mundane or routine, could be a medium of God's love. Every dish washed was for God, every potatoes peeled, every slop bucket feed to the pigs. "Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do. . . We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him, and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God." His small book, "The Practice of the Presence of God" is still popular.

There are various other “means and methods” (as Lawrence put’s it) to “pray without ceasing” Fasting is one. Going without food for a time causes our stomach to protest. “Why am I hungry? That’s right, I am fasting. Why am I fasting?” – The answer to this is difference between a Godly and a fleshly fast – “That’s right to be closer to God.” So hunger directs you to prayer.

² See also *Foster* pages 130-132ff