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Praying from the Inside Out

Several years ago while I was conducting a conference on the secret closet of prayer in New England, the pastor of the host church found a unique way to affirm the teaching. He showed me the original handwritten records of their church, dated August 10, 1787.

I was awestruck by what I read, for the character of the congregation was revealed in those historical documents. The church covenant in particular disclosed their reverence and awe for the holiness of God. But what especially intrigued me, and what the host pastor specifically wanted me to see, was the following portion of that covenant:

You do now solemnly covenant to give up yourself to be a member of Christ's body in this church, engaging, by His help, to walk with them in all the ordinances and institutions of the Gospel. Particularly, you engage to be a faithful attendant on *the duties of the closet*, family and public worship of God, as He hath appointed in His Word. [italics added]

This is the only church covenant I have ever seen that included the practice of the secret closet of prayer as a condition for fellowship! Notice the order in which the ministry of prayer was to be established in the congregation: from the “closet” to the family altar and finally to the congregational setting (the “public worship of God”). Here we have affirmed the principle of *praying from the inside out*.

How do you develop a praying church? You build it from the inside out. In other words, you begin with the individual and move outward to the corporate body. No wonder the Church and our beloved nation experienced such favor in the sight of Almighty God during those formative years. The early American Church was truly a “house of prayer”!

As mentioned in the introduction, there is only one imperative in the entire Word of God that directs us to a specific geographical location of prayer—the *secret closet*—and that is in Matthew 6:6. From this position you build outwardly and sequentially.

Learning how to pray from the inside out requires an examination of the various levels and modes of prayer—and how to implement them. This is essential if we are to fulfill the Lord’s exhortation, “My house will be called a house of prayer” (Matthew 21:13).

Levels of Prayer

There are at least four levels of prayer mentioned (or implied) in Scripture:

1. The Secret Closet

The *first* and foundational level is the *secret closet*, or private prayer life, as detailed in the introduction. The power of the Church is generated in this place of solitude with God, in concert with the enabling work of the Holy Spirit and His unerring Word.

2. The Family Altar

The *second* level of prayer is found in Matthew 18:19: “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” This image of two praying together is clearly pictured in the *family altar*. Though the context of this passage discusses church discipline, certainly the Lord must have had in mind the necessity of having a prayer partner and/or the husband-wife prayer relationship.

This verse in Matthew is especially significant when coupled with Ecclesiastes 4:9-10: “Two are better than one, / because they have a good return for their work: / If one falls down, / his friend can help him up. / But pity the man who falls / and has no one to help him up!” This should motivate every believer to have a prayer partner and particularly every Christian husband and wife to pray together. In my many years of ministry, including leading a number of couples’ retreats, I have never heard of a Christian marriage in which the husband and wife prayed together regularly that ended in divorce.

However, in spite of these extraordinary promises, the surveys I have conducted show that less than one percent of Christian husbands and wives actually pray together. Is it any wonder that there are so many hurting marriages within the Church? Unless

husband and wife are praying together, it is difficult for them to be committed to the same vision—to be of like heart, mind and purpose. The family altar builds a oneness in the marital relationship and a team spirit in the family, but couples who are not praying together are apt to find the “family team” to be an illusive dream.

May God help us to rebuild the family altar!

3. Small Group Prayer

The *third* level of prayer is found in Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” This *small group* or *triplet praying* is inserted between two praying together and the public assembly for prayer. Though there are only two or three—the smallest possible group—we have the promise of Christ’s awesome presence: “There am I.” We can depend on the power and presence of His Spirit with our spirits.

Triplet prayer is graphically illustrated in Exodus 17:8-13, when the nation of Israel encountered their first armed conflict. Moses ordered Joshua to assemble the men and fight the Amalekites with the sword, while he, along with Aaron and Hur, ascended to the mountaintop with the wonder-working staff, which represented Jehovah’s power and presence.

As long as Moses prayed with the staff raised, the Israelites were victorious. But when his arms grew tired and he lowered the staff, the Amalekites began to win. To help Moses keep praying, Aaron and Hur held up his arms.

This exemplifies the supernatural power of prayer even among the smallest of groups. Who won the

battle—the men of the sword or the men of the staff? Though the sword was essential for victory, the prayers of these three men were the determining factor!

4. Congregational Prayer

The *fourth* level of prayer is found in Acts 1:14: “They all continued to give their persistent attention with absolute unanimity to prayer which was characterized by its definitiveness of purpose, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with His brethren.”¹ Here we find 120 disciples of Christ huddled in an upper room, waiting for the descent of the Spirit upon them. Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit was not intended to replace prayer but to quicken and encourage it. As they gave themselves to extraordinary *congregational* prayer, coupled with explicit agreement and visible union, the Dove of the Heavens descended upon them with power and grace, giving birth to the New Testament Church.

This is a graphic illustration of what our Lord Jesus Christ intended Christianity to be—a way of life in which the local assembly would be a “house of prayer.” However, when the gospel was exported to the Greeks, eventually they turned it into a *philosophy*. Then it emerged in Rome where it became an *institution*. From there it surfaced in Europe, where it was turned into a *culture*. Finally it was exported to America, where we in this generation have turned it into *entertainment, excitement and/or enterprise*.

Tragically, we have failed to realize that prayer is the launchpad of all ministry and that without it we short-circuit God’s chosen method of work. The

prayer service in most American churches has become the least attended meeting on the church calendar—and in some cases, the most boring. Many churches have even eliminated any semblance of congregational praying.

I am persuaded that these symptoms arise from a lack of effective *prayer discipleship*—particularly, a lack of emphasis on the secret closet. How many of us, for example, remember our fathers, mothers, pastors or any other mature believers taking us aside and actually *teaching* us how to pray? It makes sense that those who do not know how to pray effectively in private will, in all probability, not be inclined to pray in public.

A dynamic praying church must be built *from the inside out*, employing all four levels of prayer: the secret closet, the family altar, small group praying and finally, prayer in the congregational setting. While this book focuses on the secret closet, it is crucial to keep in mind the interrelationship between private and other forms of prayer.

Is your church suffering from prayerlessness? Is it hard to find time and motivation for small group prayer? Are you having difficulty building your family altar? The solution lies behind the closed door of the secret closet.

Modes of Prayer

There are two modes of prayer portrayed in Scripture:

1. Spontaneous

An example of the first and most frequently used, *spontaneous prayer*, is found in the second chapter of Nehemiah. When King Artaxerxes notices the downcast countenance of his cupbearer, Nehemiah, he asks, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill?” (2:2).

Nehemiah was indeed sad, for he had received bad news about the Jews who had returned from exile to Jerusalem. The walls of the city were broken down and the gates had been burned, leaving them defenseless before their enemies. Being the righteous leader that he was, Nehemiah had spent many days weeping, mourning, fasting and praying for his fellow Hebrews and their plight. The king had accurately observed the burden of Nehemiah’s heart.

Nehemiah responds to the king’s inquiry by explaining the condition of the city of his ancestors. This prompts a second question by King Artaxerxes: “What is it you want?” (2:4). Sandwiched between the king’s question and Nehemiah’s answer, we find the cupbearer petitioning God: “Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king” (2:4-5). This is an illustration of spontaneous prayer, a very useful and powerful mode of prayer. And in Nehemiah’s case, it was truly effective, because it opened the door for him to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Most of us engage in this style of praying many times throughout the day. As we shop, we pray that the Lord will grant us a good return for the money we spend. As we visit the family doctor, we plead for grace and mercy. As we walk or jog, we intercede for

others as prompted by the Spirit . . . and so on. All of this is categorized as spontaneous prayer.

Several years ago I was asked to share the meaning of Christmas at a friend's home. He had just been converted a few months before, and it was his family's custom to have an annual bash on the Sunday prior to Christmas. Typically their guests (mostly unbelievers) would quite generously indulge themselves with alcoholic drink. His intention was that I give a gospel message centered around the birth of Jesus.

Upon my arrival, my enthusiastic friend greeted me at the door and with much excitement proceeded to inform me of the large number of guests that they were expecting. Then very abruptly he shared a vexing problem: "Do you think we should serve some wine? I realize we shouldn't give them the hard stuff, but what about a little wine? After all, didn't Jesus turn water into wine at a festive occasion?"

Richard, what in the world have you gotten yourself into? I asked myself. But to my friend I said, "Well, Gordon, what do you think you should do?" Immediately he responded, "I think we need to pray!"

With that he ordered me to follow him to his study. When we got there, he gave me another command: "Get down on your knees over there and I'll get down here." Then my friend led in spontaneous prayer.

"Jesus Christ, this is Gordon Walker here, and we have a mess of a problem on our hands. You know these unbelieving friends of mine have no idea what kind of a party they're coming to, and I'm uncertain about serving them wine. The time is short, Lord, so

I'm counting on You to answer quickly! Now, Burr wants to talk to You."

At this I doubled over in laughter, for his prayer had all the characteristics of simplicity, sincerity and even a phone line to the throne room of the heavenlies. After regaining my composure, I prayed; then we got up off our knees and hustled out to the kitchen where my friend informed his charming wife that God indeed had answered our prayers—there would be no wine! Instead, they decided to use a counterfeit white grape juice mixed with a couple of other juices, all of which were "unleaded."

It was interesting to watch their friends frequenting the punch bowl—absent the "punch." After a while I was privileged to share the authentic Christmas story.

What an experience—and it was all in answer to spontaneous prayer!

2. Designated Times

The second mode of prayer could be labeled *designated times* with God. This is illustrated in Daniel 6:10: "Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before." This suggests that Daniel had regularly scheduled appointments to be alone with Jehovah.

This mode of prayer is possibly the most significant because it implies a disciplined commitment to set aside time to be with our great Creator. This mode is applicable to all four levels of prayer. Every

Christian should have a designated time to meet with God in solitude, as well as a designated time spent with a prayer partner or a small prayer group. And certainly the midweek congregational prayer meeting would be considered a designated time of prayer.

The secret closet of prayer is a *designated time* to be alone with God. It is in this environment that believers develop intimacy with God. This is where we are revived and molded into the people our Master intends us to be.

It is sad to see Christians who have been in the faith for many years but have never experienced this personal intimacy with their living Lord. The following testimony bears witness to this fact:

This is not so much the story of a man who had sunk so deeply in sin as to bring about much shame upon his family, but an account of a gracious Savior so ready to forgive and stand by a man.

When this man fell upon his knees to acknowledge his transgressions, he learned that this Savior had already washed away his sins and desired to take up residence in his heart. At that very moment he was saved for all eternity!

Did he immerse himself into the Word? Did he become a man who lived off his knees in prayer? He did not. The only thing he did was truly repent and turn from his wicked ways.

This man was then asked to become a deacon. He consented, not having the foggiest notion of what was expected of him. Indeed, God was so patient. Would you believe forty years of patience?

Then this man moved to a new area and another church, where again he was asked to serve as a deacon. Again, he consented, but this time he knew the “ropes”—all the while continuing to test God’s patience.

Finally this man was exposed to the teaching of the “secret closet of prayer,” along with the powerful dynamic of Scripture praying. Then God said, “Jim- my, no more hiding. No more pretending. No more counterfeit religion.”

I’m the man in this story, an eighty-two-year-old man who has found boundless joy in my closet of prayer, who has experienced a new passion for my Savior and abounding love for my brothers and sisters in Christ. By the way, I have been forgiven for all those lean and wasted years!

Oh, how I praise God for reaching into my soul in these winter years of life and introducing me to the secret closet of prayer that has led to a truly intimate and personal relationship with my Lord Jesus Christ!

*James Marr (1915-2004)
Island Baptist Church
Camano Island, Washington*

This dear brother is an example of what happens when a man or a woman *captures an ever-consuming vision* for becoming a praying saint and sees how it relates to the totality of life. The importance and nature of this vision is discussed in the next chapter.

Study Questions

Personal Study

1. Identify what the author means by “praying from the inside out.” Do you think this concept holds true for you, your family and your church? What kind of changes might you see in your family and church if you further developed this concept of “praying from the inside out”?
2. Read Matthew 18:19. The author identifies this verse with the practice of having a prayer partner. Do you have one? If you have a spouse who is a believer, do you regularly pray with him or her?
3. Was the author’s concept of a family altar a new idea to you? If you do not currently have this practice in your family, think about ways you could institute it.
4. Read Matthew 18:20. When you pray with other believers, do you usually think of it as gathering in Jesus’ name? Do you sense the Lord’s presence? How does meeting together in Jesus’ name affect the content of your prayers?
5. Read Acts 1:14. This passage speaks of the early Church believers being “joined together” in prayer. The Greek word literally means they had “one passion.” What made the first-century believers unified in their passion for prayer? How does this relate to the concept of the secret closet?

6. On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest, rate your participation in the four levels of prayer:

7. Read Nehemiah 2:4-5. This kind of spontaneous prayer is usually a response to encountering a problem or need in the course of an average day. How often do you respond to a life situation with an impromptu prayer? How might you learn to make this kind of response more of a habit?
8. Daniel had a regular practice of praying three times a day, and he continued this practice even when it violated the law and put his life at risk (see Daniel 6). Think about what it would be like to follow his example. We don't know how long Daniel's times of prayer were, but just for the sake of argument, imagine yourself including three daily prayer sessions of ten to fifteen minutes each into your schedule. Would it be doable? What would you have to give up? Would it be worth it?

Group Study

1. Welcome any new members of the group and ask them to share what they hope to get out of the study. Invite others in the group to

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- share any changes they have seen in their prayer lives since the previous meeting.
2. Discuss the author's concept of praying from the inside out. What would happen if this were implemented in your church?
 3. Have the group list family issues about which they might pray with their spouses and/or families. (They may include such things as praise, thanksgiving, salvation of family members, family finances, children's school performance, etc.) Suggest that the members of the group write down this list and use it at their own family altars. (Note: Praying together can be a sensitive issue between spouses, so try to handle this topic carefully, especially if both husband and wife are in the group.)
 4. Have someone read Matthew 18:19-20. Have the group break up into prayer partners or triplets and spend a few minutes practicing small group prayer. (Note: Though small group prayer is both common and scriptural, there may be members of the group who have never done it or are not entirely comfortable with it. It may help to provide the participants with short lists of suggested topics to pray about.)
 5. Discuss the two modes of prayer mentioned by the author—spontaneous and designated times. What can help you develop and strengthen these two habits?
 6. Read the testimony of James Marr at the end of the chapter. Close in prayer, asking that the members of the group might have the

same experience of joyful and enriching prayer.